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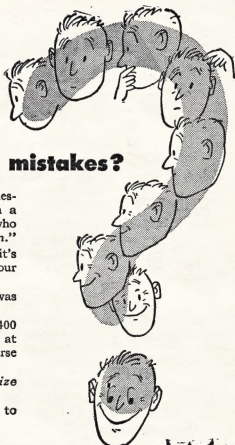
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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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JOHN A. THOMPSON

LAST ISSUE we described methods of building different types of campfires. It turned out to be too big a subject for one article, so we carry it on this month before we go on to campsites.

At any campsite where you intend to linger a while a few minutes' work will often save a lot of time and trouble later on in your three-meal-a-day cooking chores. Build yourself a small, quickly set up three-sided fireplace out of flat rocks with the open side pointing into the wind. A fireplace enclosing a foot or a foot and a half square fire-bed will do all the cooking you can handle, including stews, boiled dishes, and outdoor baked potatoes done to a turn in the embers.

If you've had the foresight or the means to tote along a light iron grate to set over the top of your impromptu fireplace, you'll find it the most useful bit of scrap metal you ever included in your camp gear.

Rocks are not always available for a quick camp fireplace. In such cases you can do about as well with two fairly large logs of green wood. The logs should be about five feet long. Set them together so they form a V with the open end to the wind.

Build your cooking fire at the open end. The closed end at the apex of the V will afford a handy warming shelf on which to set pots and pans of cooked grub until you are ready to make the favorite holler of a camper's day—"Come an' get it before I throw it out!"

Several meals can be cooked this way before the green logs burn or char away. The green log fireplace has another advantage. After supper, when twilight mingles with the evening mist, the V can be

opened wider and a bigger fire built up inside it to provide a cheery blaze and warmth against the night air.

Camping in the high mountain country of the West or camping anywhere during late fall and winter calls for another dodge that can be applied to your campfire. Make yourself what woodsmen call a reflector fire. This isn't something to cook by. It's a fire to keep you warm. And a good reflector fire will throw heat into an open tent front, or a leanto type of shelter even in the winter.

To build a fire of this kind first drive two heavy green wood stakes securely into the ground. Have them about four feet apart and slanting slightly backward. Against these uprights place some good-sized green logs five feet long, one on top of each other until the pile is about three feet high.

Out from this improvised wall of green logs set two more logs on the ground pointing towards the front. These serve as andirons. Start your fire with small stuff laid between them. As the fire grows build it up with cuts of larger wood laid across the green log andirons.

Once you have a good fire going, the slanting backwall of green wood will serve a twofold purpose. First it will throw most of the fire's heat forward. Secondly it will create a draft, improving the fire's drawing qualities and carrying the smoke upward and away from the front.

As Ty Hitchely insisted, the real outdoorsman always builds a special campfire for a special purpose. He doesn't try to cook a meal over smoking cinders or a leaping blaze. Nor does he try to keep warm with a handful of sticks that will boil a pot of tea and that's all.

America has a lifetime of camping spots. Since we can cover only a few, we've settled on Wyoming, where the auto camper can lose himself in a seventh heaven of holiday pleasure.

Take the Bighorn National Forest in north central Wyoming. It has 19 camp and picnic grounds and can take care of more than 300 carloads of people. Although there are no special trailer accommodations here, trailers are allowed at all camps.

Several of these—Middle Fork, South Fork, and Sour Dough—are reachable from 16 to 20 miles out of Buffalo (the nearest supply town) on U. S. 12. The nearest Ranger station is only from two to six miles away.

Other camps can be reached at distances not exceeding 30 miles—from Tensleep or Dayton.

Some 137 established forest trails wind through the Bighorn National Forest for 860 miles. And there are besides these many miles of stock trails and minor roads. Before the white man moved in, this whole magnificent area was the favorite hunting ground of the Sioux, the Crow and the Cheyenne Indians.

In west central Wyoming you'll find Bridger National Forest. The old Oregon Trail and the Lander Cut-off passed through here, and campers may still see evidences of these early travel routes. Fine fishing lakes are so numerous within this forest that many of them are still nameless.

Ice fields and glaciers, for miles along the crest of the Continental Divide, glisten like crown jewels.

The Forest area's campsites are for the most part readily reachable from turnoffs of U. S. 187 and U. S. 91. Some are only a few miles in; others, like the Green River Lake camp, 44 miles from the highway and 40 from the nearest town, Cora.

Northwest Wyoming boasts Grand Teton National Park, where there is a fascinating auto camp ground—30 cars and 16 trailers—in the famous Jackson Hole area. There is also the Shoshone National Forest, near the town of Cody. Southwestern Wyoming holds a set-aside camping area in the Medicine Bow National Forest. The Yellowstone area is of course an old favorite that the camper will not want to overlook.

All these camp grounds are equipped with pure drinking water, open air stoves or fireplaces, and adequate garbage and toilet facilities. Supplies of dead firewood are available for cooking or other camp use without charge. Tents, attached or unattached to your car, may be put up in any of the camps but NOT, as a rule, on picnic grounds. Specific information on fishing and hunting licenses and on seasons can be obtained direct from the State Game and Fish Commission, Capital Building, Cheyenne, Wyoming.

So pack up, fellers, and enjoy yourselves.

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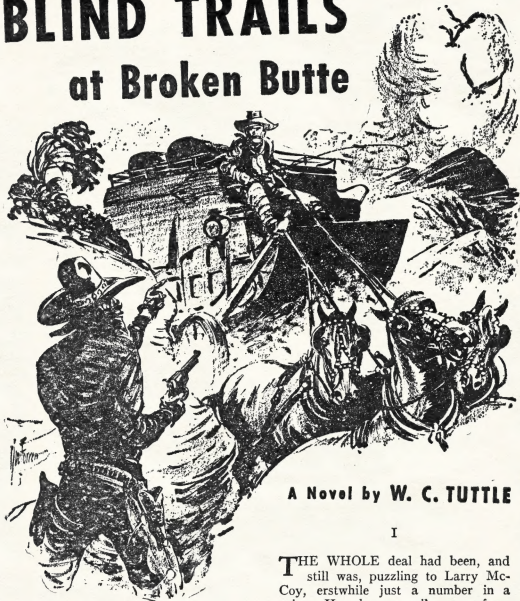
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BLIND TRAILS at Broken Butte



A Novel by W. C. TUTTLE

I

THE WHOLE deal had been, and still was, puzzling to Larry McCoy, erstwhile just a number in a prison. Here he was, miles away from the grim huddle of gray buildings,

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Thrilling Western*

They got Larry McCoy out of prison so he could tell the secret of Penitentiary Valley, and when he refused to talk, sixguns flamed

The Deck's Stacked Against a Jailbird in a

unpursued, clad in a good suit, good shoes and with some money in his pocket. He had a piece of paper in his pocket, on which was an address, but no name. The warden had given it to him.

Larry had spent just over one year of a fifteen-year sentence for a stage robbery. Not enough to change him much. He was just over six feet tall, lean as a hound, hard-eyed, cold-jawed. Women said he was handsome; men held back any opinions, except to agree that he would be able to take care of himself. He still walked with the gait of a man who has spent most of his life in the saddle, arms slightly bent.

It was night when he came to the address. There was a huge wall and a grilled entrance to the big estate, but the gate was open. He walked slowly up the broad drive, turned on a flower-bordered walk and went up to the huge porch, almost screened completely in shrubbery.

"What would a millionaire want of a jail-bird like me?" he thought as he rang the bell. A faint musical chime came back to him, and the door opened.

A gray-haired butler faced him.

"Come right in, sir," he said. "You are expected."

Larry came in and followed the butler into a huge, high-ceiled room. A man was sitting in front of a crackling fire, but got to his feet at once. He was rather tall, slender, gray at the temples, wearing a tuxedo and smoking a cigar. Subdued lighting made things shadowy, but Larry could see the elegance of the furnishings. The butler retired at once.

"McCoy?" the man said.

Larry looked closely at him for a moment.

"Yeah," he replied.

"Sit down, McCoy."

Larry sat down. This thing didn't make sense either. Neither of them said anything, but the man seemed to be measuring Larry.

"I got you out of the penitentiary, McCoy," he said quietly.

LARRY hesitated for several moments, but finally he spoke.

"Much obliged."

"You like it better, eh?"

"Yeah. Now what's the deal?"

"Deal?"

"Call it by any other name yuh please—it still smells."

The man laughed shortly, tossing his cigar into the fire.

"You're from Penitentiary Valley, McCoy."

Larry stiffened a little. Where did the valley fit into this?

"You know the valley pretty well, eh, McCoy?"

"I was raised there."

The man lighted a fresh cigar and puffed slowly for a while, as though choosing the right words.

"McCoy, you know a secret entrance into Penitentiary Valley," he said.

It was not a question, but a statement of fact. Larry's lips tightened momentarily. "Do I?" he asked curiously. "That's kind of amazin'."

"You can get out of Penitentiary Valley, without going through Devil's Gateway, McCoy."

"Yeah," said Larry. "That's right—in a balloon."

"This is no time for humor!" snapped the man. "I got you out of the penitentiary—for information that only you can give me. You'll give me that information, or you go back to serve extra time."

Larry's eyes narrowed, as he gripped the arms of his chair. So that was the deal, eh?

"You are out of the penitentiary but you're not a free man, McCoy," the man was saying. "Not free—unless you tell me what I want to know."

"Yea-a-ah!" breathed Larry. "It was all kinda irregular. No hearin', no papers—but through the big gate at night, wearin' clothes that no freed

Deadly Deal that Busts the Range Wide Open

man ever gets from the pen. I reckon I know the deal, mister. If I don't tell yuh somethin' that I don't even know, I'm an escapee, dodgin' the law."

"You are not a fool, McCoy."

Larry leaned back in his chair, his eyes on the French windows, heavily draped. A breeze from the partly-opened window moved the drapes.

"Trapped, eh?" said Larry quietly.

The man laughed shortly. "An escaped convict, trying to burglarize the home of a wealthy man," he said. "McCoy, I believe you'll talk."

Larry got slowly to his feet, but the other man got up quickly. Larry had his back to the windows, but he stepped swiftly aside and around the other man. Nothing happened.



LARRY MCCOY

"They gave me clothes, shoes, hat, money, but I bought the gun myself," Larry said tensely. "I don't like the smell of you, my friend, and I'm goin' away from here!"

The man yelled, "Jack!" and whirled away, but Larry plunged into him, just as a gun blasted through the open window.

Larry felt the man go limp, flung him aside and dived for the window. He splintered some of it with his shoulder, and a gun blasted so close

to his face that it curled the hair above his left ear, but he crashed into the gunman, and they piled up against the heavy porch-railing.

The gunman was apparently knocked out cold. Larry jerked to his feet, vaulted the railing and crashed down into the shrubbery. A moment later he was running for the street, shoving the gun into the waist-band of his pants.

THE MAN was trying to get to his feet, when the butler came.

"Are you badly hurt, sir?" gasped the butler, trying to lift up the man.

"Through the shoulder, I believe! Help me on the couch and send for my doctor—quickly!"

"The—the police, sir?"

"Don't be a fool! Call the doctor."

A man came through the open window. His nose was bleeding, and one eye was completely shut. His clothes were in violent disarray, and he seemed dazed and confused. Not a handsome creature at his best, he was anything but presentable now. He stared with one good eye at the man on the couch, saw the back of the hurrying butler, and sat down heavily on a chair.

"You clumsy fool, you shot me!" complained the man on the cot.

"And then what happened?" asked the man huskily.

"I don't know," replied the wounded man.

"Neither do I, but it was somethin' awful, boss."

It was two weeks later when Larry McCoy came to Gateway City, late in the afternoon. Gateway was the shipping point for Penitentiary Valley. The loading corrals were filled with beef, and there was a sizable herd outside. A long train of cattle-cars filled the siding, and the air was filled with clouds of dust from the loading and smoke from the engine. Sweating, dust-covered cowboys yelled

and swore as they forced the animals through the chute into the cars.

The cattle were from Jim Braden's J Bar B spread, the biggest outfit in Penitentiary Valley. Old Jim, huge, bareheaded, his white hair and long white beard flying in the wind, stood on the plank top of the loading corral, like one of the old prophets watching his flock. Dust clouds eddied around him as he yelled orders and advice, which no one heard.

Larry McCoy saw all this, as he rode past, heading for the main street of Gateway City only a short distance away. But it was a different-looking Larry McCoy now. A single spin of a roulette-wheel had outfitted this erstwhile cowboy. No flash of silver and bright colors now. His bat-wing chaps were black, black shirt, black Stetson, black saddle. Even his horse was a slim, black gelding.

Black, was Larry McCoy, even to the black-handled Colt in a short, black holster. There had been nothing in the newspapers about the shooting, nothing about the escape of Larry McCoy; so Larry McCoy was back home again, with nothing to show that he had ever been a number in the prison. It was all very puzzling to Larry McCoy.

He stabled his horse and went to Sing Loy's little restaurant. Sing, a little old Celestial, had known Larry for years, but evinced no surprise on seeing Larry. However, Larry saw him through the kitchen doorway, counting on his fingers. One didn't add up to fifteen. Larry grinned. Others wouldn't count—they'd ask questions—and Larry didn't have the answer.

Larry was alone in the restaurant, when a man came in. Larry knew him very well, indeed. In fact, he was Bill Caswell, the stage driver, who had identified Larry as the man who had stuck up his stage. Bill was a big, unkempt sort of a person, addicted to chewing tobacco and wearing long hair. He started to sit down but when he saw Larry he changed his mind, helped himself to a toothpick from the counter and went out.

LARRY knew that the news of his appearance in Gateway City would be broadcast very quickly, and he was not at all surprised to see Con Taylor, the sheriff, walk past the restaurant a few minutes later, and stop to look through the window. Con and Larry had never been good friends. Con was a tough hard-bitted lawman who might have stepped right out of a Remington drawing. His deputy, Elmer Mays, was a lazy, drawling, ex-cowpoke, brother-in-law of Con Taylor. Elmer and Larry had been friends.

Larry didn't know it, but Con Taylor went straight to the depot and sent a wire to the penitentiary, saying that Larry McCoy was in Gateway City, and what could be done about it. Then Con went to the loading pens, where the J Bar B were loading the last of the herd, and told Old Jim Braden that Larry McCoy was back.

The old patriarch stared wide-eyed at the sheriff. Mingled sweat and dust ran down into his white beard, and he wiped his gnarled hands on his overalls.

"You sure, Con?" he asked hoarsely. "You ain't mistaken?"

"I saw him, Jim. Bill Caswell told me he was in Sing Loy's cafe. I've sent a wire to the penitentiary. Can't do nothin' until I get an answer. But it's him, big as life."

"He ain't been there more'n a year, Con."

"That's right. Sent up for fifteen years, and out in one. Maybe he went over the wall, Jim; he's a hard man to handle."

Tonto Dean, foreman for Braden, came up to them, leading his horse.

"Last car loaded," he said thankfully. "I've et more'n my share of dirt today. How are you, Con?"

"All right, Tonto. I was just tellin' Jim that Larry McCoy is in town."

"Larry McCoy?" exclaimed Tonto. "That don't add up, Con."

"It shore don't—not in my figures." Jim Braden shook his head, as he slapped the dust off his shirt.

"If he went over the fence, he



A masked man in
the doorway was
covering them all

wouldn't show up here; Con," he said quietly.

"Larry ain't the scared kind," said Tonto Dean.

They walked back to the main street. The J Bar B boys were heading for the saloon to wash the dust from their throats, and the long cattle train was heading east. Elmer Mays, the deputy, was coming from the depot, bringing a telegram for the sheriff. It was from the warden, Jeff Neill, and read:

**LARRY MCCOY RELEASED
THREE WEEKS AGO**

Con Taylor handed the telegram to Jim Braden, who read it with narrowed eyes and gave it back.

"Well, I don't reckon anythin' can be done about it," he said.

"It's out my hands," said Con Taylor. "See yuh later, Jim."

The sheriff and deputy went on down the street. Jim Braden sat down in a chair in front of the Gateway hotel while Tonto Dean leaned against a porch-post and rolled a cigarette.

"I know what yuh're thinkin'," said Tonto.

Jim Braden nodded but did not look up at his foreman. Tonto had been with Braden a long time.

"Yuh're thinkin'," said Tonto quietly, "that Faith will be glad."

"Funny girl," said Braden, as though talking to himself. "Made up her mind a long time ago and won't change it. Cussed stubborn little fool."

"A chip off the old block, Jim," said Tonto.

Braden didn't deny it. Finally he said:

"You'd like to see her and Larry McCoy get married."

"I didn't say that, Jim. At the time they was goin' to get married, I said I was glad. That was a year ago. I don't want her to marry a jail-bird, Jim. Him bein' loose don't change that."

"No, it can't change," agreed Jim Braden. "If he ever—"

"Wait!" exclaimed Tonto quietly. "He's comin' across the street."

II

GLUMLY they watched Larry McCoy come across to them, his batwing chaps flapping, spurs jingling, his hat pulled low over his eyes. He stopped, one foot on the hotel porch and looked at them.

"Hyah, Larry," said Tonto quietly.

"Pretty good, Tonto," replied Larry evenly. "Howdy, Mr. Braden."

Jim Braden didn't say howdy. In fact, he didn't say anything for a while, as he eyed Larry.

"You ain't goin' back to the valley, are yuh, McCoy?" he finally said.

"Ain't I?" queried Larry quietly.

"After what happened, you can't."

"Can't I? What's to stop me?"

"Ain't you got no pride?"

"Mebbe I've got too much pride. Yuh see, Braden, I was innocent."

"The jury found yuh guilty, McCoy. You was positively identified, and you didn't have any alibi. You said you was drunk, that's all."

"Yeah, I was drunk, but a drunken man couldn't do the thing I'm said to have done."

"That's all in the past," said Braden wearily. "If you go back into the valley, don't try to see Faith."

Larry McCoy winced, but his jaw tightened.

"I'm not a fool, Braden. Faith wouldn't want to see a jail-bird."

"Then why are you goin' back to the valley?" queried Braden.

Larry looked steadily at Jim Braden. "To kill the man who should have gone to prison in my stead," he replied bitterly.

Braden and Tonto looked keenly at Larry but said nothing. They knew he meant it. Larry was as fast as any gunman they ever had in Penitentiary Valley, and he never dodged trouble.

"You talk as if you had an idea, Larry," Tonto said.

"I have an idea that he is still there, Tonto, that's all."

Jim Braden had been staring down

at the sidewalk. Now he looked up at Larry.

"After a year it's a cold trail," he said. "If there ever was a trail."

Larry laughed shortly. "Maybe it'll warm up, Braden. You didn't want Faith to marry me. You told a man you'd give yore right arm to stop that marriage. It was stopped, and you've still got yore right arm. Maybe you didn't have to pay that price, eh? Think it over."

Larry turned and walked back across the street, bat-wing chaps flapping, spurs jingling. Jim Braden watched him, his eyes somber. Tonto began rolling another cigarette.

"It's funny," mused Tonto. "I thought he was comin' back to find Faith and he's pointin' right at you, Jim."

Jim Braden got slowly from his chair, drew a deep breath.

"We better go eat, Tonto," he said.

As they walked toward the restaurant Tonto said:

"Jim, did you say you'd give yore right arm?"

"Yeah. I said it, and I meant it."

"I've found that it don't pay to make extravagant offers," said Tonto dryly.

"Yeah, it sounds like that," agreed Braden. "But if you think I had anythin' to do with it, yuh're crazy too, Tonto."

"Well, I reckon we're all more or less crazy, Jim."

As Larry reached the other side of the street, two riders came in from the south and dismounted at a hitch-rack. Larry recognized one of them as Shell Turk, foreman of the Diamond A, but the other man was a stranger.

TURK WAS tall, lean, saturnine, a reputed gunman but a good man with cattle. Larry had never liked Shell Turk. The two men came up the sidewalk, and Turk stopped short at sight of Larry.

"Well, can yuh imagine this!" he exclaimed. "Larry McCoy!"

"How are yuh, Shell?" asked Larry quietly.

"Well, I'm all right. What happened, McCoy?"

"Oh, I reckon they got tired of havin' me around, Shell."

"Yea-a-ah? Well, well! Glad yuh're out. Meet Ed Corwin. Ed, this is Larry McCoy."

They shook hands.

"I've heard about you, McCoy," Corwin said.

"Nothin' good," said Larry.

Corwin smiled. "That's all in yore point of view. There ain't none of us perfect. Goin' into the Valley?"

"Thought I might. How's the Diamond A, Shell?"

"Well, just about the same as ever. Belle and me was talkin' about you the other day. She'll be surprised."

"Yeah? Prob'ly. How is she?"

"Fine."

"First woman I ever punched cows for," Corwin said with a smile. "She's a good boss and her money is just as good as any man's."

"Sure," said Larry.

Shell Turk hitched up his belt and smiled at McCoy.

"I'll buy yuh a drink, Larry," he offered but Larry shook his head.

"Me and liquor don't get along, Shell. Thank yuh."

"I don't blame yuh. The I Bar B shipped today, didn't they?"

"Yeah, a big shipment. I reckon Braden is doin' all right."

"Yuh didn't run into him, didja?" asked Shell curiously.

"Oh, sure. Had a talk with him and Tonto."

Shell Turk smiled crookedly. "Didn't invite yuh to visit him, did he, Larry?"

"You didn't need to ask that, Shell; it didn't sound good."

"My mistake," said Shell quietly. "Come out to the Diamond A. I'll guarantee we'll make yuh feel at home, Larry."

"Much obliged, Shell. I dunno what I'll do there. Just goin' down to look things over. You know how it is."

The two men went on to the sa-

loon. Larry rolled a smoke and sat down in front of the hotel. He hadn't thought about Belle Ames for a long time. It wasn't over two years ago when Old Bill Ames went on a trip. A wild, old devil was Bill Ames, crowding eighty.

No one knew where nor how he met Belle Ames, but he married her. She wasn't much past thirty. Bill lasted six months, and left everything he owned to Belle who had never been outside a city in her life until she came to Penitentiary Valley. If she ever loved Old Bill, she was the first and only, because nobody else did.

Belle Ames was pretty, wore diamonds and overalls at the same time, smoked cigarettes and swore like a pirate. The folks of Penitentiary Valley never quite approved of Belle Ames, but she didn't care. She detested all of them, but she hated Jim Braden. He had called her shameless. Men were just a little afraid of her. Larry McCoy hadn't been afraid of her, and folks said that Belle was "settlin' her cap" for the good-looking Irishman. But Larry only had eyes for Faith Braden.

Larry half-smiled over his cigarette. He had always thought of Belle Ames as Old Bill's "widder." He remembered now that Belle was good-looking, a nice figure—and not so awful old, at that. She had pretty eyes and she knew how to use them, he remembered. Women grew old very quickly in Penitentiary Valley, and he wondered if Belle Ames had changed.

Funny thing—thinking of Belle Ames. He had been so in love with Faith that he couldn't see anybody else. Funny thing, too, Shell Turk saying that they'd make him welcome at the Diamond A. Why should they, he wondered?

HE SAW the J Bar B boys come from the restaurant. They mounted their horses and headed for home. It was twenty-five miles from Gateway City to Broken Butte, and they'd get home late. He wondered if

Jim Braden would tell Faith that Larry was free. If things had been different, he'd be heading that outfit now, instead of Tonto Dean.

Elmer Mays, the lanky deputy sheriff, came along, simulated great surprise and shook hands heartily with Larry.

"Just over here on a visit?" he asked dryly.

"They gave me a vacation, Elmer."

"Oh, yea-a-ah. Well, it's nice to see yuh, Larry. I was shore surprised to see yuh."

"Knew I was here, didn't yuh, Elmer?"

"Well, yea—kinda. Con got all excited when Bill Caswell said yuh was back and sent a telegram to the penitentiary about yuh. Figured maybe yuh went over the fence, but the telegram said you was released three weeks ago."

Larry was visibly relieved to know that the warden was willing to admit his release. Still, it wasn't all just according to Hoyle.

"Goin' back into the Valley?" asked Elmer.

"Yea, I thought I would."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh. I wish you'd tell me somethin', Larry."

"Go ahead."

"How can a feller get sent up for fifteen years and get out in one?"

"As far as I can figure out, Elmer, I got fourteen years off for good behavior."

Elmer grinned. "That's what I said to Con, and he said I was crazy."

"Maybe we're both crazy, Elmer."

"Yuh can't be crazy, and get rewarded like that, Larry."

"Well," said Larry soberly, "maybe they thought I was a bad influence for the other prisoners, and let me out."

"That sounds more logical," Elmer nodded. "Yea, I like that. Are yuh pullin' out for the valley tonight?"

"No, I think I'll wait for mornin', Elmer; I'm in no hurry. After all they've got along without me for a year."

"That's right. I heard some of the

J Bar B outfit talkin' about yuh in the restaurant a while ago, and they seemed to feel that they could get along without yuh for another year or two. Course, even one of Braden's cowpunchers could be wrong, yuh know. But they seem to think they have a corner on all the brains in the valley. I hear that Old Jim Braden is figurin' on havin' a crown made."

Larry smiled. "Still wants to be king, eh?"

"Well, he just about is, I reckon. He wouldn't even go to a funeral, 'less'n he could be the corpse. Well, I'll see yuh later. If Con sees me talkin' with yuh, he'll declare me corrupt."

"Peewee" Jones, as his name implied, wasn't very big, but was inclined to get indignant easily. In fact, he was able to come to a white-heat almost instantly. Peewee owned the Cross J spread, which he operated with the assistance of one Honeymoon Hough, a lanky, slow-moving and entirely collected cowpuncher. Honeymoon was always several feet behind Peewee like a big, good-natured pup.

PEEWEE got his mail at the Broken Butte post office, went outside and sat down to read it. Peewee didn't get a letter very often but he got one today. Honeymoon leaned lazily against a porch post and paid no attention to his boss until Peewee ripped out a curse that could be heard a block away.

"Peewee, that's awful," Honeymoon said quietly. "Supposin' Aunt Emma heard yuh?"

"Shut up!" snapped Peewee. "Holy sufferin' bob-cats, I'll—huh!"

"Irked, huh?" asked Honeymoon. "Somethin' cut yuh to the quick, huh? Yuh know I've allus wondered what that was."

"What was?" snapped Peewee.

"Quick."

"Oh, shut up!"

"Yuh don't know, that's why," sighed Honeymoon. "The Bible speaks about the quick and the dead. Mebbe

that means gunfightin'. If yuh're quick—"

"Honeymoon, will yuh shut up?" asked Peewee tensely. "I'm tryin' to think."

"Oh, well, sure. But it ain't much use, I don't reckon."

Peewee got up and shoved the letter in his pocket. He was upset about something.

"Bad news, Peewee?" Honeymoon said.

"Bad news for somebody," replied Peewee grimly.

Jim Braden was across the street, and Peewee hurried over there. After a few moments of conversation, he came back to Honeymoon.

"You get on yore horse and go out to the Lazy N and tell North to be at the J Bar B at nine o'clock tonight," he ordered Honeymoon. "Then yuh go to the Quarter-Circle T and tell Thorsen the same thing."

"And then what?" asked Honeymoon.

"Go home, if yuh can find yore way."

"Uh-huh. Any message for Aunt Emma?"

"No, you blasted—you run along, Honeymoon, please. Some day I'm goin' to—I'll be home before you are; so yuh don't need to worry about me—nor Aunt Emma."

Aunt Emma was Mrs. Peewee Jones, a big, motherly sort of woman, who had a deeply religious streak, was intolerant toward liquor, and felt that every time she managed to get Peewee in church she had really snatched a brand from the burning. Honeymoon didn't want to go to Heaven—he liked Penitentiary Valley pretty well.

Larry McCoy had been in Penitentiary Valley three days, living with "Shorty" Davis, who operated the livery stable and feed corral. Shorty and Larry had been good friends, and when Larry rode into Broken Butte, a day later, Shorty was one of the very few to welcome Larry back. Shorty batched in the same shack that Larry had used, a little place, a

half mile from town.

Larry wasn't exactly being snubbed; he was being avoided. He had not seen Faith Braden, nor had he seen Belle Ames, although Belle had sent word to him that she would like to see him. Shorty had attended Larry's trial and listened to all the evidence.

"The funny thing about it, Larry," he said, "I don't believe Bill Caswell lied."

Larry's mouth dropped open, then snapped shut, and his eyes narrowed.

"What is this, Shorty?" he asked in a tight voice. "Are you aiming to—"

"Now don't go off half-cocked," Shorty quickly interrupted.

"Then you better repeat what you just said."

"I say that Bill Caswell didn't lie."

"You mean he actually saw me pull that job, Shorty?"

"He thinks he saw yuh. I've talked with Bill a lot about it, but he sticks to his story."

Larry shook his head. "I can't figure it, Shorty. I admit I was drunk. I never could stand much whisky. Things are kinda hazy, but I remember comin' back here, and it seems like I went to bed. I'm sure I was alone but I have a hazy recollection of somebody givin' me a drink. That part of it is more like a dream. Maybe I took the drink, I don't know. Anyway, it was past noon next day, when I woke up, with Con Taylor, the sheriff shakin' me, and the men in the shack."

"I dunno," sighed Shorty. "Bill Caswell said yuh was sober. You got five thousand dollars, and when Bill made a move, yuh shot him through the right arm. Nobody ever did find the money. Bill told just how yuh was dressed, and even told about that old bone-handled Colt yuh used to wear. Oh, he had yuh where the hair was short, Larry."

"That's right. I didn't have a chance."

"And Bill's scared stiff." Shorty

grinned. "Somebody said you was back here to get the man who sent you to the pen, and he thinks yuh mean him."

"Maybe his conscience bothers him," said Larry quietly.

"Mine would, even if I had told the truth," said Shorty with a smile.

III

BELLE AMES came to Broken Butte that afternoon, driving a pair of half broken sorrels hitched to a buckboard. Larry saw her, watched her tie her team to the hitch-rack at the general store. She was wearing a blue shirt, overalls, high-heel boots, but no hat. Belle had learned fast.

Larry hung back, not wanting to embarrass her, but she saw him. She shook hands like a man, her pretty eyes grave.

"Didn't Shell invite you out to the ranch?" she asked. Larry nodded.

"Folks might talk," he said quietly.

"Might talk? In Penitentiary Valley? No-o-o-o!"

"Well, you know how it is, Mrs. Ames," he said lamely.

"My name is Belle, cowboy. How have they treated you—as if I didn't know?"

"Oh, not bad. I can't complain, Miss Belle."

"Liar. How about the King? Have you had audience with him yet?"

"Oh, yuh mean Jim Braden? Yeah, I ran into him in Gateway City."

"I see." Belle's eyes searched his. "And he drew a deadline between you and the J Bar B, eh?"

"Well, yuh see, I—well, not exactly."

"I heard he did."

"Ma'am, yuh can hear a lot of things in Penitentiary Valley."

"Truer words have never been spoken, Larry. I met Peewee Jones as I was coming in. He was on the way out to tell me that the cattlemen are having a meeting at the King's

palace tonight at nine."

"A cattlemen's meeting, eh? You'll go, of course.

"Not me. I never attend; I send Shell Turk. Once was enough. This one has been called on mighty short notice. Peewee didn't say what it was all about, but he was excited over something."

"He mostly always is." Larry smiled. "Do you ever see Aunt Emma?"

Belle laughed heartily. "Me? Larry! She said I epitomized the works of the devil—whatever that means. It sounds insulting. No, I'm sorry I can't give you any information on Aunt Emma. Now I'll ask you one. Have you seen Faith?"

Larry shook his head. "I don't expect to," he replied simply.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to ask that, Larry."

"It's all right, Miss Belle."

"I'd like it better if you'd call me Belle. I'm not a Miss, and you can't very well call me Mrs. Belle. I call you Larry."

"Yes'm, that's right, Belle. Seems kinda funny."

"Don't you like it, Larry?"

"Oh, sure—fine." He smiled bashfully.

"Good! Come out to the ranch, will you? We won't dig up the past, and I'd like to have you, Larry."

"Thank you. I'll be out."

He watched her go into the store. It was good to know that somebody in the Valley was friendly enough to talk with him, and invite him out. He realized that people on the street

had seen him talking with Belle Ames and he remembered that those same people had hinted that Belle Ames was trying to get him away from Faith Braden. Larry didn't think so. Who was he for two women to fight over? People get some funny ideas. Anyway, he wasn't anything to fight over now.

Five men sat in the main room of the J Bar B that evening, Peewee Jones, of the Cross J, Ed Thorsen, owner of the Quarter-Circle T, Shell Turk, representing the Diamond A, Harry North, owner of a little place, known as the Lazy N, and Jim Braden. The conversation was general, until all five men were there, when Peewee Jones took the floor.

"I had this here meetin' called," he stated grimly, "cause today I got a letter from Tommy Harris, sent from Tonto Wells. You remember Tommy, don't yuh?"

The men nodded silently. Peewee took out the letter and leaned in close to a lamp.

"I don't need to read it all," he said. "Just this part. Tommy says, 'I heard a couple of fellows talking in a saloon yesterday, and I heard one of them mention Penitentiary Valley. I kinda listened in, and I heard one of them say that we've already got a spy in Penitentiary Valley, lookin' for a chance to get sheep into the place. He said that they're running out of feed and have got to make a move pretty quick. Then I think they thought maybe I was hearing something and moved away. I don't know

[Turn page]

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who they are, but they're with some sheep outfit."

JIM BRADEN swore quietly, and the others waited for him to speak his mind on the subject. Finally he said:

"We've always faced that situation, men. We know that feed is a big problem, and that the sheep men have always looked at this valley. If they ever got a foothold, we're through. The law won't help us in a deal like that. None of us can exist on what land we actually own. We must control that grazing land—and defend it. What's yore idea, Peewee?"

"I dunno," sighed Peewee. "They can't come in through Devil's Gateway; we can block that. What can a spy do in here?"

"Who is the spy?" asked Thorsen huskily. Thorsen was a huge man, famed for his physical strength.

"Yeah, who is the spy, Braden?" North said. "We can stop him, if we know who he is. There ain't no other way into the valley."

"Did any of yuh ever hear that there was?" asked Thorsen.

"I heard it," said Braden, "but I don't believe it. Several years ago I heard that Larry McCoy boasted that he knew a way. I think he lied. I asked him if he did and he laughed and said, 'Yes—with a balloon.'"

"Could Larry McCoy be a spy for the sheep interests?" asked North.

None of them spoke. Jim Braden shifted his position in his chair.

"McCoy has been out of the penitentiary for three weeks," he said quietly. "He didn't come straight to Gateway, because—well, if we knew where he went, before he came here—"

"He's a good bet," said Peewee. "If I thought he was, for sure, I'd take a gun and—"

"You don't know for sure," interrupted Braden.

"Why did they release him?" asked North curiously.

"That puts the hammer square on the nailhead," said Braden. "Why did

they turn him loose? Con Taylor wired the prison for information, but they merely wired back that he had been turned loose three weeks ago. Didn't say why. Why would they turn him loose, when there wasn't any question of guilt?"

"It's kinda funny," agreed Shell Turk.

"It's more than funny!" snapped Peewee. "By doggies, they can't turn criminals loose to act as sheep spies down here. Why don't we get Larry McCoy and make him talk?"

"Wait," said Jim Braden. "There's somethin' wrong with this deal. Leave this to me. I'm ridin' straight to Gateway City and I'll send a telegram to the governor of the State. I know him well. I'll have him get all the information for us."

"That's a great idea!" applauded Peewee. "When will yuh go, Jim?"

"Tonight. I'll send the telegram right away and wait for the answer. Don't say anything, 'cause we don't want Larry McCoy to suspect anythin'. If you men are finished, I'll saddle my horse."

"Do yuh want any of us to ride with yuh?" asked North.

"No, Harry, I'll go alone."

Shell's horse was tied down at the corral, not with the others in front of the house. He got his horse and joined them and they all rode away. Jim Braden wanted that telegram worded right. He sat down at a table and wrote on a piece of wrapping-paper. Faith came down the stairs and stopped beside him. Her hair was like copper in the lamplight. He looked at her, but said nothing.

"I heard all of it," she said. "Larry isn't a sheep spy."

"Isn't he?" queried her father. "A lot you know about it. Go back to bed where yuh belong."

"You're going to Gateway City to-night?"

"I sure am."

Braden continued to write.

"Why not send Tonto?" Faith said. "He and the boys will be back from town before midnight."

BRADEN IGNORED the question, as he folded the telegram.

"That'll get me the information," he said, picking up his hat.

"I heard that Larry told you he was here to kill the man who really robbed that stage," said Faith.

Jim Braden looked sharply at her. "Well?" he queried.

"Who do you suppose he is watching, Dad?"

"Watchin'? Nobody! It's just a cover-up for him. He's here to clear a trail for some blasted sheep outfit. It's all he's fit for. Go to bed and forget Larry McCoy. I'll be back—when I get back."

When Belle Ames told Larry about the emergency meeting of the ranch-owners at the J Bar B, he wondered what it was all about and if he was under discussion. After supper that evening he saddled his horse and rode out near the Braden ranch. He saw four men ride in at the ranch, and one of them was Tonto Dean. A little later he saw one man ride in, and decided that it was Shell Turk, foreman for Belle Ames.

Larry left his horse and went close to the ranchhouse, but was unable to find a place where he might hear the conversation inside the house. So far as any information was concerned, he had drawn a complete blank, but he did figure that the men might do some talking after they came out, so he crouched in against one end of the front porch where a tangle of foliage concealed him. They might discuss things, as men are apt to do, following a meeting, before leaving the porch.

But Larry was doomed to disappointment. Four men came out.

"Where's yore horse Shell?" one of them said.

"Down by the corral fence," Shell Turk replied. "I'll ride to town with yuh."

Three of the men mounted in front of the house, and Larry saw them ride away. He relaxed and remained there. He knew that most of the J Bar B crew was in Broken Butte.

Tonto Dean was likely alone in the bunkhouse.

The starlight was sufficient to give fair visibility, and Larry thought he saw a man down by the corral fence. The impression was sort of like a moving shadow but he gave it little thought.

Then the door opened and Jim Braden came out, closing the door behind him. He went quickly down the few steps and headed for the stable. In a few moments he heard him open the stable door. Larry decided that there was no chance for him to learn anything there, and started back to his horse.

But he had not taken more than a dozen steps when a shot blasted the silence. It was down near the stable. Larry forgot his own danger as he went running down in that direction. The stable door was open, and a lighted lantern hung from a hook on the wall. Jim Braden was sprawled against a feed-box, lying across the saddle he had just taken off a rack.

Larry halted in the doorway, gun in hand, staring at Jim Braden. He heard Faith's voice, as she called from the house, and he heard her footsteps, as she came running down to the stable across the hardpacked ground. Larry moved aside, giving her room to come in, and they looked at each other for a moment. Faith was frightened, wide-eyed, as she stared at her father.

"Dead?" she whispered huskily.

"I don't know," whispered Larry. "I heard the shot and—"

"We've got to get a doctor!" she gasped. "Larry, how could you—"

Tonto Dean shoved Larry aside as he came in. Tonto had a gun in his hand. His eyes shifted to Jim Braden, and he stepped back, covering Larry.

"Drop that gun!" he snapped. Larry dropped it on the stable floor.

"I didn't shoot him, Tonto," said Larry.

"Didn't, eh?" Well, somebody did."

"Tonto, we've got to get a doctor!" exclaimed Faith. "I'll go!"

SOMEONE else was coming, riding up to the stable doorway. It was Peewee Jones. He came in, eyes wide. Faith was leading her horse from a stall.

Peewee looked first at Larry and then at Tonto.

"Got him, eh, Tonto?" he said.

"Faith, what did you see here?"

Tonto said. "Where was McCoy?"

"He was in here when I came!" panted Faith, tightening the cinch on her saddle. "Oh, he couldn't have done that, Tonto! I don't know—"

She swung into the saddle and they moved aside to let her go. They heard her going away at a swift gallop.

"You might at least examine him—one of yuh," Larry said. "He may need help—now."

"Keep a gun on him, Peewee," ordered Tonto.

"I'll do that," said Peewee. "What have yuh got to say for yourself, McCoy? Why'd yuh shoot Jim Braden? Won't answer, eh?"

"I said I didn't shoot him, Peewee. I heard the shot and came down here."

"He ain't dead," said Tonto. "Still breathin'. Maybe we better take him up to the house."

"Leave him alone," said Larry. "Packin' him around might kill him, and he still might have a chance."

"Gettin' kinda chicken-hearted, ain't yuh?" asked Peewee. "Shoot a man and then worry about him dyin'."

"Yore brain just about fits yore body, Peewee," said Larry soberly.

The spunky little ranchman almost danced up and down with rage.

"Never mind my brain, you—yuh jail-bird! Comin' back here to spy for the sheepmen. Oh, we got the dead-wood on you, McCoy; and you'll hang to the highest tree in the country. If Jim Braden dies, you'll never come to trial. You'll be danged lucky to see the sunrise in the mornin'. I'd help yank the rope."

Larry grinned at him. "Blood-thirsty little devil, ain't yuh? Yes, you'd help yank a rope; it's just about yore caliber, Peewee."

"Stop arguin'," advised Tonto. "Larry, why did you come out here tonight?"

"Curiosity, I reckon."

"You came to shoot Jim Braden!" snorted Peewee.

"You knew the cattlemen were holdin' a meetin', Larry?"

Larry nodded. "I heard you were, Tonto."

"And you thought it concerned you, eh?"

"The dirty spy knew it did!" snapped Peewee.

"Who told you I was a spy, Peewee?"

"Never mind who told me—yuh are."

"Hold it, gents!" rasped a voice behind them. The three men turned to see a masked man in the doorway, covering them.

The black mask covered his head and shoulders, and he was not wearing any hat. Larry, Tonto and Peewee merely stared at him. Peewee didn't wait for any order; he dropped his gun. The man chuckled.

"You can drop yore gun, too, pardner," he said to Tonto who obeyed quickly. "Kick both of them guns over to me," he said.

Larry kicked them. Larry's gun was still on the floor where he had dropped it. The masked man said;

"If that's yore gun, McCoy, pick it up, and we'll be goin'."

Wondering what it was all about, Larry picked up his gun, dropped it into his holster and backed out with the masked man. They went up near the house, stopping in the heavy shadow. Peewee came from the stable, mounted his horse quickly and went racking out of the place, heading for Broken Butte.

"Get yore horse and head out of here," the masked man said. "If they get yuh, you'll hang."

"Who are you?" asked Larry curiously.

"Nobody, McCoy. You better get smart—they'll block the road to Gateway City. *Adios.*"

IV

WITHOUT another word, the man hurried away, disappearing in the darkness. Larry went back to his horse and climbed into the saddle. The masked man was right—they'd block the road at Devil's Gateway. He sat there for a while but finally swung his horse around and headed away from Broken Butte.

He rode slowly. Two miles beyond the J Bar B there was a trail which led back to the rim of the valley. For no reason Larry turned off at that trail, rode a quarter of a mile and drew off the trail into a mesquite thicket. He had the feeling that he was being trailed and he wanted to be sure.

And he was right. He had hardly turned in his saddle to watch the back-trail when a rider came along. It was too dark for Larry to see what the horse and rider looked like, but he could follow their sound as they stayed on the trail, heading for the rocky rim.

Then he rode out of the thicket and headed back to Broken Butte. He had to be very careful now, because their would be people on the road, coming to J Bar B ranch. Two miles beyond the ranch he met them, but he concealed himself off the road before they saw him. There were a dozen riders, a wagon and a buckboard team, all hurrying.

Larry stabled his horse in Shorty's little stable, groped his way into the shack and went to bed.

It was after midnight when Shorty Davis came to the shack. He lighted the lamp and stared at Larry McCoy, sprawled on his bunk. Shorty kicked off his chaps, flung his spurs aside and sat down.

"Why did you come back here, Larry?" he asked.

"No place else to go, I reckon," Larry answered with a smile. "What's goin' on?"

"Plenty—and it ain't good, Larry. Why'd yuh do it?"

[Turn page]

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"I didn't, Shorty. Is Jim Braden still alive?"

"Yeah, he's alive. You didn't, huh? That ain't the way they told it to me. I had to take the doctor out there. Couldn't bring Jim back with us. They've blocked the road to Gateway City and you can't get out of the valley, unless yuh know another road out. Shucks, Larry! There's a dozen men on the rim tonight. They've sent for the sheriff, but until he comes, there ain't no law in the valley. Jim Braden is still alive, and Doc thinks he'll pull through, but they'll hang yuh to the highest tree in the valley if they catch yuh."

"Nice outlook for a young man," sighed Larry, as he rolled a smoke.

"They're sayin' that you know another way out."

"Are they? Was anythin' said about a masked man, Shorty?"

"The feller that took yuh away from Tonto and Pee wee? Yeah. They say he's here with yuh. Yuh're workin' together to get sheep into the valley. Are yuh, Larry?"

"What do you think, Shorty?"

"If I thought yuh was, I'd take yuh right now. I don't like sheep."

"Neither do I."

"Uh-huh." Shorty began rolling a cigarette, his eyes troubled.

"Larry, why did yuh ever come back here, anyway?" he asked. "I never asked yuh that before, 'cause it wasn't none of my business."

"Well," replied Larry quietly, "I came back here to kill the man who held up that stage and put the job in my lap."

"Is that why they let yuh out in one year, Larry?"

"They don't usually let a man out of the penitentiary to shoot somebody. They put yuh in for things like that, Shorty."

"I thought they did. Larry, they say you went out there tonight to spy on the meetin', and when you heard that Jim Braden was goin' to try and find out how you got out of the pen, you shot him."

"That don't make sense, Shorty."

Jim Braden isn't the only man who can get that information. I couldn't shoot everybody."

"It'd take a lot of shootin'," admitted Shorty. "But they won't listen to any arguments. If they get yuh, yuh're got, Larry."

"Yeah, that's right. And if they catch me here, you'll be in bad. Maybe I better head into the hills, Shorty; I didn't think about you, in this deal."

"You stay here," said Shorty quickly. "Like I said before, if I thought yuh was guilty, I'd take yuh myself. But I don't."

"Thanks, Shorty."

"Aw, shucks, it ain't anythin'. If they run me out, good! I'm kinda tired of Broken Butte, anyway. Let's go to bed."

THEY HAD been in bed about an hour when somebody knocked on the door. Shorty didn't light the lamp. He opened the door. Pee wee Jones and some other men were there.

"Sorry to wake yuh up, Shorty," Pee wee said. "We just wondered if McCoy left any of his stuff here."

"Mebbe a letter or somethin' that might be evidence," added Ed Thor sen.

"No, he didn't," replied Shorty. "He took all his stuff."

"I told yuh he was headin' out," said Pee wee. "Thanks, Shorty."

"Any news?" asked Shorty.

"Nope. Con Taylor ain't got here yet, and the boys ain't back from the rim. Jim Braden is doin' all right, Doc says. We'll get McCoy."

"Much obliged, Shorty," said Thor sen. "See yuh later."

The men left and Shorty closed the door. "I'll remember this, Shorty," whispered Larry.

"I hope yuh live to remember it a long time," replied Shorty.

Con Taylor, the sheriff, came in early that morning. The posse had just returned from searching the rim, and they were tired and grim.

"There was a rider up there, but we lost him," one of the riders said. "Picked him up south of the J Bar B,

but he got away in the dark."

Con Taylor went out to the J Bar B to find out how Braden was getting along and to question Faith and Tonto. Braden was still unconscious. Faith told him what she saw, and Tonto described what happened to him and Peewee Jones when the masked man released Larry.

"Dad wrote a telegram last night before he went outside," said Faith. "I saw him put it in his pocket but he didn't have it later."

"I heard about the telegram," said the sheriff. "What did Larry say when you found him in the stable last night?"

"He said he didn't do it."

"What else could he say, when you caught him red-handed?"

"I don't know," replied Faith, "but I still don't feel that he shot my father."

The doctor called from the house and they all went up there. Jim Braden was conscious. The doctor cautioned them about exciting him.

"Jim, did you see the man who shot you?" said the sheriff.

"Yeah," whispered Braden.

"Was it Larry McCoy?"

Braden's eyes shifted from face to face.

"The man wore a black mask," he said painfully. "I don't know who he was or—"

"That's enough for now!" interrupted the doctor.

They went back to the front porch.

"Oh, I'm glad—glad!" Faith said.

"It wasn't Larry; it was the man who took him away from Tonto and Peewee."

"Larry's pardner?" queried the sheriff.

"Well, I'm afraid that'd have to be proved, Con," said Tonto. "Yuh can't hold Larry for the job."

"What about this sheep-spy idea, Tonto?"

"That'd have to be proved, too, Con."

The sheriff shrugged and turned away.

"I reckon we'll have to find the man with the black mask," he said.

"You won't be lookin' for Larry?" asked Tonto.

"We sure will. If we can find him, maybe he'll tell us what we want to know. Well, I'll be driftin', folks."

PEEWEE JONES and Honeymoon Hough came to Broken Butte. Honeymoon hadn't been in the posse last night so Peewee brought him along in case the sheriff needed an extra man. Honeymoon didn't like the idea.

"You're draggin' me to m'doom, Peewee," he complained. "I ain't no good at upholdin' the law. Pa used to tell me, 'Honeymoon, don't take sides. Keep clear of the law and don't get crimeful. Take sides, and somebody'll slit yore earthly envelope. Keep neutral.' And I have."

"Yuh're too blasted lazy; that's what ails you, Honeymoon."

"Yea-a-ah, and Pa had somethin' to say about that, too. He said a good worker was a fine reputation for a mule. Pa allus said that if a man had a couple, three lives t'live, he could afford to work hard in the first one, so's to enjoy the others. Pa was smart."

"Lookin' at you—I doubt it," said Peewee.

"I favor m'mother."

"That's the trouble with the young generation," sighed Peewee. "They don't show respect for their parents. Sayin' that you favor yore ma!"

"Anyway, I ain't qualified to be on no posse, Peewee. Supposin' I was to run slapdab into Larry McCoy? Then what?"

"Make him throw up his hands, of course."

"Supposin' he didn't?" You've got to consider that angle of it. I say to him, 'Ho! up yore hands,' just like that. Then he says, 'Go ahead and make me hold 'em up.' What's next?"

"You've been packin' a gun for several years, and yuh know how to shoot, Honeymoon. What do yuh think is next?"

"My funeral," sighed Honeymoon.

"I've seen Larry McCoy shoot."

"Yea-a-ah," sighed Peewee. "I don't reckon you'd be much help."

Belle Ames and Shell Turk were in town, riding in a spring-wagon with a spirited team. Belle told Peewee:

"My brother is coming to visit me, and we're going to Gateway to meet him."

"Well, that's fine said Peewee. "As a matter of fact, I didn't know yuh had a brother."

"I have two brothers and one sister."

"Yuh know," grinned Peewee, "I never—well, why shouldn't yuh? I'd like to meet him."

"Thank you, Peewee. My brother Nick has been sick for a long time, and he thought a visit out here, where it is quiet, might do him a lot of good; so I asked him to come. I just heard that Jim Braden was conscious and said a man in a black mask shot him."

"He did, huh? Black mask. That son-of-a-gun! Well, that—uh—kinda looks like mebbe Larry McCoy didn't—yuh didn't hear if they got him, did yuh?"

"They haven't yet. I talked with the sheriff a few minutes ago."

"Well, well! Braden's conscious, eh? That's good."

Shell Turk came from the general store and climbed up on the seat with Belle.

"Mebbe we better be rattlin'," he said. "It's a long trip."

"Good luck," said Peewee. "We'll hold down the valley while yuh're gone."

HONEYMOON found Bill Caswell, the stage-driver, in the Eagle Saloon. Bill was more than slightly intoxicated. In fact, he had not been exactly sober since Larry McCoy came back. Bill was big, burly and not at all a mental giant. He usually needed a haircut and a shave, which he rarely had. He eyed Honeymoon sadly.

"Hyah, Billyum," greeted Honeymoon. "Still alive, huh?"

"Uh-h-h-h—what do yuh mean?"

asked Bill.

"Larry McCoy ain't got a fair crack at yuh yet, eh?"

"Fair crack?" Bill wet his lips and swallowed painfully.

"Yea-a-ah," drawled Honeymoon. "Larry's smart, don'tcha know it? He never kills anybody when somebody is watchin'. He'll find yuh in a da-ark place some night, and zingo! Bill," Honeymoon lowered his voice to a deep whisper, "you know them silver-studded chaps of yours? You ain't done promised 'em to anybody yet—have yuh, Bill?"

"Promised?" queried Bill fearfully.

"Uh-huh, uh-huh. Dead men don't wear chaps. Pa allus said that if yuh're sure yuh're goin' to die, give away yore stuff and don't wait for the lawyers to fight over it."

"Oh," said Bill painfully. "Huh! Honeymoon, I'll buy a drink."

"Good! A feller might's well git rid of his pocket-money, too."

The drink of Eagle liquor improved Bill's spirits a little.

"Yuh know," he confided, "I never sent Larry to prison. All I done was tell the court what I saw."

"Yeah, I know, Bill," agreed Honeymoon. "But what he wants to know is, who told yuh to see Larry McCoy holdin' up the stage."

It required quite a while for Bill to digest that remark. It was a bit subtle for Bill's mentality.

"Nobody told me what I seen, Honeymoon," he finally said.

"That's good, Bill, awful good. But what about the chaps?"

"Well, I dunno about the chaps. They cost me sixty dollars."

"Money," said Honeymoon soberly, "is a drug on the market in a graveyard. If I was you, I'd just quit figurin' profits."

"Uh-huh," grunted Bill. "Honeymoon, if you was in my fix, what'd you be doin' about now?"

"Well, I'll tell yuh, feller," replied Honeymoon gravely. "If I was in yore fix—and with the time you've had to do somethin'—right now I'd jist about be passin' the North Pole."

"Yeah," said Bill vaguely. "Did anybody ever promise to shoot you?"

"Don't grieve," advised Honey-moon. "You prob'ly won't even feel it."

V

SHORTY DAVIS hurried down to the shack as soon as he heard what Jim Braden had to say. It didn't exonerate Larry McCoy, but it did ease the situation. Larry listened to Shorty's story, and decided to go up to Sing Loy's place and get something to eat, but Shorty protested that the sheriff and part of the posse were still in town.

"I can't hide out all the time, Shorty," said Larry. "I'll take a chance."

No one challenged him on the way to the restaurant. Sing Loy looked at him in amazement.

"Plenty men look fo' you," he said. "You crazy?"

"Sure," grinned Larry. "Fry me some ham and -eggs, Sing."

"Plitty quick you gone hang," de-

clared the old Chinese.

"They always feed a man well before they hang him, Sing."

Sing went away, shaking his head, and began rattling the pans on his stove. Honey-moon Hough and Bill Caswell came into the restaurant, both well intoxicated, arguing over some point in the Spanish-American War, in which neither had taken any part.

"I'll leave it to Sing Loy, Honey-moon," Bill said. "Sing, didn't General Custer whip the Mexican Army at Maniler? Ans'er, yes 'r no."

"The evidence," replied Honey-moon, "is very evident—I'm standin' still. If anybody had ever threatened to shoot me, right now I'd be keepin' company with one of them willer-the-wisps. You ain't never seen me runnin', have yuh? I'm awful fast."

"Yuh are?" queried Bill. "How fast? Give me an example."

"Well, sir—are you buyin' another drink?"

Bill shoved some silver on the bar and motioned to the grinning bartender.

[Turn page]



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"Well, sir," continued Honeymoon, "one time I run a mile on a circ'lar track agin time. Mind yuh, I wasn't scared. Jist a couple jumps from the start m' hat blew off. Well, sir, I went that mile so fast that I caught that same hat on m' head as I came down the homestretch. If I'd been scared—well, the hat would have been up too high yet. Well, here's a easy death to yuh, Bill."

"Don't say that," complained Bill. "I don't want to die."

"Don't, huh? Bill, how old are yuh?"

"I'm jist forty m' last birthday."

"Oh, well, shucks, you've seen most everythin'. anyway. We've all got to die some day. How about them chaps?"

"But supposin' he don't kill me, Honeymoon?"

"Bein' a cripple is worse'n death. You better make up yore mind. I'd look good in them chaps. What about that gun? You ain't willed that to anybody, have yuh?"

"I'll buy another drink, Honeymoon," said Bill. "You shore sadden me up somethin' wonderful. It's worse'n I ever figured."

"No sabe." Sing was grinning. "Too busy."

"I c'n prove it," declared Bill. "I was there, I tell yuh. General Custer shed to me, 'Bill, I've got t'—'"

Honeymoon had turned and saw Larry McCoy only a few feet away at a table. He kicked Bill on the ankle, and Bill turned his head.

"Th' Army shed t' me—no, it was General Cushter who shed t' me—I—uh—oh, m'gawsh!"

Bill never did say what General Custer wanted; he went right through that screen door, taking part of the door-frame with him, and fell into Peewee Jones who was just coming in. Bill was almost twice as big as Peewee, and he took Peewee right along. They went off the high board sidewalk, landed in the street, with Bill on top.

But Bill didn't stay on top. He

bounced off Peewee and went on an erratic gallop straight up the middle of the street. Larry and Honeymoon came to the doorway and watched him go.

"An'," remarked Honeymoon, "I tol' that feller I was fasht."

"What happened to him?" asked Larry.

"Happened? Ain't you goin' to kill him, Larry?"

"Kill him—for what?"

Then Peewee Jones again entered the scene. Peewee was mad. He didn't know who hit him and he didn't care who it was. He had one eye that was fast swelling shut, a skinned knee, and numerous other bruises. Con Taylor, the sheriff, was coming down there, as were several other men.

"Thish is no place for a timid soul like me," Honeymoon said owlishly.

Peewee squinted at Larry with his good eye. Maybe it wasn't such a good eye, at that. Peewee came closer, his lips compressed tightly.

"Was it you that hit me, you—you shepherd?" he gritted. "You—you blasted—"

"He did not," interrupted Honeymoon. "Bill Caswell bumped yuh."

"Thanks, Honeymoon," said Larry quietly.

"Oh, don' men-men'shun it, Misser McCoy; I enjoyed it, pershonally."

"Git away from behind that—that shepherd, Honeymoon!" yelled Peewee. "Gimme room to salivate him."

"Hold yore fire, Peewee," ordered the sheriff.

"Saved at the las' moment," declared Honeymoon. "Hurrah for our shade."

LARRY turned to the sheriff. "Are you lookin' for me, Con?" asked Larry quietly.

"We've been lookin' for yuh," nodded the sheriff. "I dunno just how yuh stand now."

"You can arrest him, can't yuh?" asked Peewee. "If yuh don't, we'll hang him."

"You ain't goin' to hang anybody,

Pee wee," retorted the sheriff. "You can forget all that sort of thing now. I'll handle it."

"Pee wee," said the grinning Honeymoon, "I'll betcha Aunt Emma will give yuh blazes. You couldn't git a eye like that—and be shober."

"I ain't had a drink and you know it!"

"McCoy, I'd like to have a talk with you—in private," said the sheriff.

Larry smiled. "Suits me fine," he said. "You lead the way."

They went up to the far end of the street and sat down on the sidewalk in the shade of an empty building.

"Larry, I want yuh to tell me exactly what happened at the Braden ranch last night," Con Taylor said.

Larry told him exactly what he knew about the shooting of Jim Braden, his capture by Tonto and Pee wee, and his release by the man in the black mask. Con Taylor nodded. It was, in most part, exactly as Tonto and Faith had told him.

"What became of the man in the mask, Larry?" he asked.

"He pulled out. I asked him who he was, but he didn't say."

"Uh-huh. Jim said he was shot by a masked man. That kinda lets you out of that deal—until we know better. Now, what about you bein' a sheep spy?"

Larry laughed. "Con," he said, "that isn't true. I was raised in a cow country, and they sent me up for a job I didn't do. Even at that, I don't hate Penitentiary Valley bad enough to sheep it out."

"I hope yuh don't, Larry, but everybody has branded yuh as workin' for the sheep interests."

"I know it, but they're all wrong, Con."

"You'd been out of the pen for three weeks, before yuh came here, Larry. You had clothes, a good horse, good saddle and a gun. They don't give a released convict enough money for that."

Again Larry laughed. "Con, I can't tell yuh much, except that I had a

hundred dollars and a hunch. The roulette-wheel stopped where I guessed. I outfitted right there."

"But why did yuh come down here, Larry? You know how folks would feel toward yuh. It'd be the last place I'd go, I know that."

"Con, if you was innocent, you'd come back. Somewhere in this valley is the man who looked like me. I'm lookin' for that man."

Con Taylor studied the face of the man he was supposed to arrest, and decided that Larry was telling the truth.

"All right," he said. "I hope yuh find him. But will yuh tell me how and why yuh got out of the penitentiary?"

"No," replied Larry firmly, "I won't, Con."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know why myself."

"Well, that's kinda funny, don'tcha think?"

"Yeah. Mighty funny. But you've got to believe me, Con."

"I don't know why, but I do," replied the sheriff. "Good luck to yuh, kid. And from what I've heard around here, you'll need it."

"Thank you, Con. Remember this, I ain't askin' no odds from the people nor the law. I'll dig this out for myself. All I ask is that I'm let alone."

"As long as there ain't no complaints, I'll keep hands off. Of course if somebody swears out a warrant, that's different, Larry."

"I know. You've got a job to do, Con. Much obliged."

THEY GOT up on the sidewalk.

"What on earth happened to Bill Caswell down there?" the sheriff said.

"From what Honeymoon told me, I reckon Bill thinks I came back to kill him for testifyin' against me."

"So that was it," grinned the sheriff. "Man, he sure went places!"

"Yeah," Larry chuckled. "And he took Pee wee part way with him."

Larry went back to Shorty's stable

and saddled his horse. Belle Ames had told him that he would be welcome out there and Larry was badly in need of a welcome. There was no one in sight around the ranchhouse as he dismounted under an old oak tree beside the house and went around to the old rambling porch. He could hear voices through the half-open door.

"No, I think some sunshine will do me good," a man said.

Then he stepped out, carrying a cushion in his hand. Larry jerked forward, staring at him. It was the same man he had met in that big drawing-room—the man who said he had got Larry out of the penitentiary. He was quite pale and needed a shave. Their eyes met and the recognition was mutual.

"Well, I'll be a sidewinder's sister!" Larry said.

Belle Ames stepped into the doorway, her eyes frightened for the moment as she recognized Larry.

"Larry, this—this is—is my brother," she stammered.

"Yea-a-ah," said Larry quietly. "I've met the gent. Hyah, Brother."

"How do you do, McCoy!" exclaimed the man. "Imagine meeting you in this place."

The man spoke loudly, as though hard of hearing. Larry smiled.

"I don't think so," he said. "You knew I was here. I don't believe I got yore name."

"My name is Nick Thorne, McCoy."

"Oh, yea-a-ah! Nick Thorne, the big sheep man, I wondered—"

"Stick 'em up, McCoy!" snarled a voice behind him.

Larry slowly lifted his arms and a deft hand snatched the gun from his holster. He turned his head and looked at the man behind him. Larry blinked and looked again.

"Wonders are still bein' created," he said quietly. "Jeff Neil!"

"All right, what of it?" snarled the man who had been warden of the penitentiary.

With a grin on his face, Larry stood there and looked him over.

"Quite a change, Neil, from a warden of a State Penitentiary to a cheap gunman. You'd look better with a shave and a clean shirt."

"Never mind my looks."

"Better herd him into the house, Jeff," said Thorne.

"Quite a welcome I got at yore place, Miss Belle," said Larry.

"Be a fool, if you want to, McCoy, but don't act dumb," she said nervously.

Larry walked in ahead of Neil and sat down. The others came in and ranged around the room. Neil sat fairly close, the gun on his knee.

"A nice little family gatherin'," observed Larry. "What's the answer, folks?"

"The answer is—you butted in," replied Neil.

"Do I have to get all my answers from this cut-throat?" Larry said.

"The answer was all right," said Thorne. "You see, McCoy, we don't want Penitentiary Valley to know who I am and you might talk."

LARRY looked at Belle Ames. The cigarette in her hand trembled but she stared right back at him.

"So you sold out to the sheep," Larry said.

"That's my business!" she flared.

"Do you suppose I have any reason for loyalty to the cattlemen? I'm not a fool."

"Never argue with a lady, McCoy," said Thorne. "Especially when the lady has the upper hand."

"Yuh know," said Larry quietly, "this kinda explains things. You took a crazy chance, Thorne. You managed to get Neil to turn me loose from the penitentiary, gamblin' on your hope that I'd follow instructions and go to meet you. You were goin' to force me to tell yuh the answer to a cock-eyed question. And when I told yuh the answer, yore gunman was to blast me down for a burglar. You'd wire Neil and he would announce my escape. Everybody in the clear—and you'd sheep out Penitentiary Valley."

"You are quite intelligent, McCoy," said Thorne easily. "I say 'quite.' If you are real intelligent, you'll tell us what we want to know without any further trouble. After all, you haven't any reason to protect this valley. They hate you, or don't you realize it?"

"They have reason to hate me," smiled Larry. "I don't blame 'em."

"If they'd caught yuh last night, they'd have hung yuh," added Neil.

"Quite likely, Neil, but they didn't."

"Yuh may wish they did."

"Well," said Belle nervously, "we better get him out of here. The next thing we know, somebody else will drift in."

"That's right," agreed Thorne. "Might be embarrassing. Where is the best place, Belle?"

"Down in the cellar, I guess; it is big enough. You better gag him, too. It isn't sound-proof."

"Yeah, and I know a good one, too," said Neil, grinning. "I'll take his clothes. That's an awful drawback to a man who wants to get loose."

"We'll see that he don't get loose, Neil. I'll help you as much as I can. Shell and Corwin should be back soon and they can help figure out what we should do. Of course, McCoy, if you should decide to tell us what we want to know, we will be willing to make a deal."

"Nice of yuh, I'm sure," said Larry soberly. "Right now I can't remember the answer."

"We'll give you plenty of time to think it over."

CON TAYLOR went back to Gateway City that afternoon. Elmer Mays, the deputy, met him at the office.

"Yuh didn't get him, huh?" he asked. The sheriff shook his head.

"Jim Braden says he was shot by a masked man, Elmer," replied the sheriff. "There was a masked man mixed up in the deal, but it wasn't McCoy; so I didn't arrest McCoy."

"Yuh should have, Con."

"Why should I?"

"Look at this here telegram that came a while ago."

It was signed by H. T. Bates, warden, and read:

NO RECORD HERE THAT LARRY MCCOY EVER RELEASED. NOT HERE, WARDEN JEFF NEIL RESIGNED AND DISAPPEARED. IF MCCOY IN YOUR COUNTRY ARREST AND HOLD FOR US. ADVISE.

"Well, can yuh imagine that?" snorted the sheriff. "No records! And Jeff Neil disappeared."

"Dirty work at the old corral, huh?" commented Elmer.

"Dirty work somewhere. Saddle me a fresh horse; I'm goin' back and get him, Elmer."

"Do yuh think he'll still be there?" Elmer asked pointedly.

"And why shouldn't he be?" the sheriff demanded, his anger rising.

"And why should he be, if he's guilty of something or other?" Elmer asked.

"Mebbe you've got something," the sheriff admitted, his jaw hardening.

"I'll help yuh out," Elmer offered. "Yuh might need it."

"No, I won't need any."

"Is he runnin' around loose?" asked Elmer.

"He was when I left Broken Butte."

"Has he killed Bill Caswell yet, Con?"

"I don't believe he wants to kill Bill."

"Well, Bill thinks he does."

"Aw, Bill's crazy."

"Naturally, he is. I'd be, too. I'll get yuh a horse, Con."

It was almost midnight when Con Taylor again rode down the main street of Broken Butte. He went straight to Shorty Davis' shack, but Larry wasn't there.

"I ain't seen him since this afternoon," Shorty said. "His horse is gone, too."

Con went to the hotel and went to bed, too tired to ask anybody else. Anyway, if he waited until morning,

he wouldn't be bothered with holding a prisoner.

VI

NEXT AFTERNOON Bill Caswell swung the four-horse stage around the hair-pin turns of Calamity Grades, secure in the belief that the law had Larry McCoy. There was nothing to worry about now and Bill drove with carefree abandon. There was never much traffic on the grade. Devil's Gateway was behind him and soon he would be down on the valley floor.

He was forced to brake-down for a particularly bad curve. The lead horses suddenly swung in against the rocky wall and Bill put on the brake solid. Then Bill drew a deep breath and his courage oozed quickly. A masked man stood there on the grade, not over a dozen feet away, pointing a gun at him.

"Larry McCoy!" Bill breathed.

"Kick down that strong box," ordered the bandit sharply, the mask fluttering away from his mouth, as he spoke the order.

Bill Caswell didn't kick it. Braving death, Bill leaped—not at the bandit—but off the other side of the stage. There wasn't much on that side, except the canyon.

Bill's heels hit on the edge, tore away the loose dirt, and then Bill lighted on the seat of his pants. It was fast, uncomfortable work but a few moments later Bill ended up in a manzanita clump, a hundred feet down the side of the canyon, being bombarded by rocks and dirt, stirred up by his swift descent.

Bill's actions frightened the team which swerved away. With brake-blocks smoking, it headed down the grade at full speed, leaving the astonished bandit with nothing at all to operate on. So he ran back a short distance, climbed up through a rocky fissure and went over to his horse.

The team swept down the grade and into the valley where Con Taylor met them. The brake-blocks were burned

away but the team was willing to stop. Con tied them beside the road, got back on his horse and raced for the grades. Something had happened to Bill Caswell.

Bill managed to get about half-way back to the grade, where he stuck. It was too steep and the ground too loose for further climbing. He was afraid he might start a slide and go into the canyon; so he anchored to a manzanita snag and waited.

When Con Taylor came along, Bill yelled at him. Con had a long lariat tied to his saddle and managed to get Bill back to the grade. The stage-driver's clothes were badly torn, he was scratched and bruised, but glad to be alive. As soon as he got his breath, he declared:

"It was Larry McCoy, sheriff. I seen him jist as plain as I see you now. He came to kill me. He said so. He said, 'Bill, I've been waitin' for this chance,' and then I jumped."

"You sure it was Larry, Bill?"

"Honest to gosh, sheriff, it was! He—he's after me."

"Get on behind and I'll take yuh to the stage. I don't reckon I'll be goin' back to Gateway City, after all."

"I'm as good as dead, 'less'n you get him first," complained Bill. "I tell yuh, I am."

"This sounds mighty funny," commented the sheriff. "Mighty funny."

"Mebbe it's funny to you but it ain't t' me; I'm scared."

THE NEWS quickly spread that Larry had attempted to kill Bill Caswell, failed to rob the stage, and had made a getaway. There was also the news that Larry was wanted back at the penitentiary. The doctor brought the news to the J Bar B. Jim Braden was able to listen to it, but was too weak to make any comments. The sheriff had organized a small posse and was making a search for Larry.

Faith wanted to talk with somebody, other than those at the ranch.

Everybody was against Larry. She saddled her horse and headed for the Diamond A. While her father didn't approve of Belle Ames, Faith wanted to talk with someone who had a broader viewpoint than the prejudiced folks of Penitentiary Valley.

It was quite a long ride, but Faith didn't mind. It was almost sundown when she drew up in front of the ranchhouse. There was no one in sight but the front door was open. Faith went up on the porch. She could see through the main room into the kitchen. The trap door of the cellar was up, braced against a chair and Jeff Neil was hunched down, looking into the cellar, and talking with someone down there.

"Mulligan, yuh might tell him that the sheriff is on his trail for stickin' up the stage today," he said.

Mulligan Jones was the cook at the Diamond A. Faith drew a deep breath. Larry McCoy must be down in the cellar. Faith couldn't hear what Mulligan replied, but Neil laughed.

"If they offered enough reward, mebbe we can cash in on him," he said.

Faith started to move back, but struck a chair leg and it rasped on the floor. Jeff Neil whirled like a flash, and saw her. Faith ran outside and tried to untie her horse, but Neil came too swiftly, a gun in his hand.

"Better hold it, sister," he said.

Faith dropped her hands. Mulligan came to the doorway, saw Faith, and swore angrily.

"Just about who are you?" asked Neil ignoring Mulligan.

"I'm Faith Braden," she said tensely. "Mulligan knows me."

"He does, eh? Faith Braden. Old Jim Braden's daughter. Well, welcome to our little show, sister. Too bad yuh came when the curtain was up. Come into the house!"

Faith went in ahead of him. Mulligan hurried into the kitchen and closed the trap-door. He was still muttering curses under his breath. Mulligan was an ex-cowboy, crippled up with rheumatism and nearing

seventy years of age. He had cooked for Bill Ames several years before Bill had got married. He came back to the main room.

"You figure this'n out, Jeff," he said. "It shore gives me a headache."

"Well," replied Neil, "it amounts to this—she knows too much."

"I—I don't know anything," protested Faith nervously.

"No?" sneered Neil. "You was in an awful hurry to get away."

"I came over to see Belle Ames."

"Well, you'll probably see her, 'cause yuh're goin' to wait until she gets back from town. She'll be glad to see yuh."

MULLIGAN walked to the doorway and looked down the road. "We've got to keep our eyes peeled," he said huskily. "We've made too many mistakes. Next thing yuh know, we'll all be in jail."

"Yuh're yellow, Mulligan."

"I ain't yaller—I'm just smart, Jeff. I didn't know what this deal was runnin' into. I figured it was all right to help the sheep git into the valley, but I didn't hire on for no blasted murder."

"Keep talkin'—keep talkin'," snarled Neil. "Tell everythin' yuh know. We're all in it, and we'll stay in it."

"All right," sighed Mulligan. "What's to be done about this?"

"We'll wait until Belle and Shell get back from town. It's up to them to figure out what to do."

Mulligan moodily rolled a cigarette. He didn't like this angle.

"If that girl is missin', they'll even search every gopher-hole in the valley, Jeff," he said quietly.

"Let 'em search. They may have to go deeper than that."

Neil's meaning was plain enough. Faith paled a little. Nothing more was said, until they heard the sounds of buckboard wheels and Belle Ames and Shell Turk came back from Broken Butte.

They came into the house, stopped

short and stared at Faith. They saw Jeff Neil, with a six-shooter across his knee.

"What's wrong, Jeff?" Belle said.

"The little lady came visitin'," replied Neil. "Me and Mulligan was feedin' the stock in the cellar, and she heard too much. Tried to get away but I caught her."

"Well, you two bungling fools!" cried Belle Ames. "Now what have you got us into. Shell, tell Nick to come in; he's down by the stable."

Shell Turk brought Nick Thorne into the house but had told him in advance what had happened. Nick looked Faith over and shook his head.

"How much did she hear, Jeff?" he asked harshly.

"Enough to have her make a break for her horse, Nick."

"Well, don't sit there and stare at her, Nick!" snapped Belle. "You are good at puzzles—figure this one out."

"Not this kind of puzzles," he replied evenly. "Unless you can think of a better one, there's only one answer. It's that—or a runout for all of us. Unless McCoy will tell us what we want to know, we are no better off than we were a month ago. This has been a costly experiment for me, and the cost gets larger every day."

"Do you think I'm going to run out and lose everything I've got?" asked Belle hotly. Thorne shrugged his shoulders.

"What did yuh find out in town?" asked Neil.

Belle laughed shortly. "They've offered a thousand dollars reward for McCoy—the pikers!"

"Dead or alive?" asked Neil quickly. Belle nodded.

"Well, that helps some," he grinned. "I don't reckon there'd be any questions asked."

"The girl puts a different light on the matter," said Thorne.

Ed Corwin came in and they told him what had happened. Corwin did not seem greatly alarmed. He had

spent two days searching the rim, but to no avail.

"I don't believe McCoy knows a way out," he said wearily. "He says he don't and I am inclined to believe him, now. Well, what's the program, if there is one?"

"There is no program," said Thorne quietly. "Believe I'll leave in the morning."

Belle laughed harshly. "You better think again, Nick," she said. "You can't shove things off on us like that."

"I don't know who would stop me," he said firmly.

"Not namin' any names, but we'll all stay, until we settle the deal, Thorne," said Shell Turk. "It may not be as bad as it looks. Take the girl up to yore room, Belle. Maybe we better tie her up and shove a gag in her mouth; you can't tell who might come here."

"Yeah, and we don't want her yap-pin' her head off," said Neil.

"I'll have another little talk with McCoy," said Thorne. "He might be in shape to talk a little bit."

Nick Thorne opened the trap door and went down to the cellar. A piece of candle, stuck in the neck of a beer bottle, furnished the needed illumination. The cellar was about twelve by ten feet in size, and the ceiling was a scant six feet from the dirt floor. Larry McCoy was securely tied and gagged, sprawled on the dirt. His eyes blinked up at Nick Thorne, who squatted near him.

"Ready to talk, McCoy?" he asked curiously.

Larry's head shook very definitely because he could not answer.

"Think it over a while," suggested Thorne. "I suppose you know that the penitentiary wired the sheriff to capture you, and that the stage driver says you stuck him up and tried to kill him today. They've even gone so far as to offer a measly thousand dollars for your hide, my friend, dead or alive."

Larry merely stared at Thorne, who played his trump card now.

"Upstairs," he said, "is your former sweetheart, Faith Braden. She came here at the wrong time and we had to detain her. When you decide to give us the right information, she goes free. Think it over, McCoy."

Nick Thorne stood up, laughed down at Larry, and left the cellar.

They tied Faith and gagged her but did have the kindness to put her on a comfortable bed. Belle Ames looked her over carefully, and locked the room behind her. Faith realized her predicament but she knew that Larry was not to blame for the attempted holdup that afternoon. No one would look for her at the Diamond A. From what she had heard, Belle Ames had sold out to the sheep interests and they were trying to find a way to get enough sheep in there to break the monopoly of the cattlemen. Larry was not a sheep spy.

She didn't know why they were keeping Larry there, except that he knew something they wanted to know. And Larry was certainly not enjoying his enforced sojourn in the cellar.

He had been bound so tightly that his hands were swollen and numb, and there was no feeling in his legs, due to lack of circulation. His gag prevented him from telling them to loosen the ropes a little. His first meal had been interrupted by the coming of Faith, and they were too concerned to bother about feeding him.

SHELL TURK went to Broken Butte to find out what was going on. A posse was in the hills looking for Larry and about midnight a cowboy came in from the J Bar B. Faith Braden had left home that afternoon and had never returned. The tired posse, headed by the sheriff, came in and heard the news. The cowboy, Al Severn, knew only what they told him, that Faith had ridden away and hadn't come back.

"She'd come back, if she could," insisted the cowboy. "Doc said she told him she'd be back by supper time. She wouldn't just stay away: she ain't that kind."

There were all sorts of wild conjectures. That the sheep men were holding her for ransom, that Larry McCoy had kidnapped her, that the man in the black mask had captured her.

"Keep yore shirts on, men," Con Taylor said. "We can't do a thing to-night. I'll go out to the J Bar B now. You boys stay here in town tonight, at the county expense, and if she ain't home by daylight, be ready to ride. I'll be in early to get things goin'."

SHELL TURK went back and reported that Faith was missing.

"Corwin, me and you will ride in before daylight to help the posse," he said. "I told Con Taylor we'd be on the job. They won't come to the ranch. The rest of yuh stay here and don't fool with the prisoners. Tomorrow night we'll decide what to do with 'em. Let's go to bed."

Belle Ames laughed. "I've got an idea. I'll ride in tomorrow and offer a thousand dollars reward for Larry McCoy. Maybe some of the rest will ante into the pot, too. It will make us look good."

"Sister, you're smart," said Jeff Neil. "You can't lose."

"I hope you're right, Jeff," she said.

The posse found Faith's horse, miles away from the Diamond A, the reins snapped off. They caught it and examined the saddle.

"It don't prove anythin', men," the sheriff said. "Maybe the horse threw her and she's somewhere in the hills, hurt too bad to walk. We'll keep lookin'. Maybe we better scatter out, in case she's on foot and hurt."

They came back to Broken Butte early in the afternoon and the sheriff was just a little discouraged.

"You men circle the valley and tell every rancher to be here this evenin'," he said. "I want everybody to know what's happened, and I want every man or boy who can ride a horse to help search. A dozen of us can't cover enough ground. We'll meet here. Get travelin'."

"Belle Ames came in and added a thousand dollars to that reward for

Larry McCoy," said one of the men. "That's fine," nodded the sheriff absently. "Mighty fine. But I'm not interested in Larry McCoy right now—unless—well, I dunno."

"You mean—unless McCoy got Faith Braden?" asked Shell Turk.

"Shell, me and you ain't that foolish," replied the sheriff. "He didn't get her. In the first place, McCoy ain't that kind of a hairpin. He's a fugitive from the law and he ain't goin' to cramp his speed with a female. We may find Larry, but we won't find Faith with him, I'll bet."

VII

LATER Shell Turk and Ed Corwin went back to the Diamond A and reported the conversation. Belle didn't want to go to Broken Butte for the mass meeting but Nick Thorne insisted.

"In a case like this, you've got to show you're interested in finding that girl," he declared. "I'll go with you."

"What I want to know is what we are going to do with Larry McCoy and that girl," said Belle.

"Wait for more reward money," Jeff Neil grinned. "They'll offer a chunk of cash for that girl and I'm bettin' they boost the money on McCoy. I can frame a deal where it'll look like McCoy killed the girl and we killed McCoy, way back on the rim somewhere."

"You're a cold-blooded devil, Jeff," said Thorne. "And if you'll take my advice, you'll keep away from that bottle. You've had too much already. We can't afford mistakes."

After supper that evening, Belle, Ames, Nick Thorne, Ed Corwin, all went to town, leaving Jeff Neil and Mulligan at the ranch. Mulligan liked his liquor, too, and he had a quart cached in the kitchen. Neil and Mulligan had some drinks and got into an argument over Larry McCoy.

"Mulligan, we've handled this all wrong," Jeff Neil said. "McCoy is stubborn. He's wise to the fact that if he does tell where that secret trail is,

we'll kill him, anyway. They didn't make a deal with him."

"Can't make a deal," declared Mulligan owlily. "Can't let him loose."

"I know it. But suppose he thought I'd be crooked enough to hold out on Thorne and Belle and let him loose, if he told me."

"Yuh're smart, Jeff," applauded Mulligan. "It's worth a chance."

"You let me handle it," said Neil. "You keep watch."

Neil opened the trap door.

"Yuh better shut this and put the rug over it, Mulligan," he said.

Jeff Neil came down into the cellar, lighted the candle, and grinned at Larry McCoy. Then he removed the gag. Larry whispered:

"Thanks—Neil."

"That's all right," said Neil patronizingly. "We're friends, Mac. Listen t' me. I've got a private deal on. Me and Thorne ain't such good friends no more. It's another sheep outfit, offerin' me plenty dinero for what they want to know. Do yuh understand?"

Larry nodded.

"Here's the scheme," Neil continued. "You tell me where that secret trail is and you go free. You'll still have to dodge the law but that's yore hard luck. All I want is the information. How does it sound? They'll kill yuh but I won't. You get a runnin' chance with the law."

"What—about—Faith?"

"Her?" Neil laughed. "I don't want her, Mac. Play the game with me and I'll turn her loose, too. Let her go with yuh."

Larry knew that Neil was lying but this was the first chance for some sort of action. He said:

"I—can't—tell you. Yuh see, I can't describe it, Neil. That rim all looks alike. If I could tell yuh, somebody would have found it long before this. I could show yuh—"

Neil laughed and shook his head.

"Too much chance, feller. No, that's out. How about a map of the spot?"

"Map?" Larry laughed painfully.

"Neil, my hands are terrible. You tied me too tight."

"Yeah, yeah, I reckon I did. But could yuh make a map?"

"Look at my hands and ask that."

Neil did. He could afford to take that chance, because Larry's feet were also tied and he had no gun. A man with hands like that can't fight. He untied the rope around Larry's wrists and let his hands free. They dropped into his lap. Larry tried to rub them together, but without any success. Neil took Larry's right hand and rubbed it violently. Returning circulation caused Larry to groan with pain, but Neil kept on rubbing. Gradually the life came back into it, but Larry didn't let Neil know this.

"Think yuh can use a pencil?" asked Neil.

"Maybe. I dunno. My fingers are like sticks, Neil. I can try."

Neil called to Mulligan, who gave him a piece of paper and a pencil. A short piece of old board answered as a table. Larry tried to draw, but the pencil kept falling from his fingers.

"Keep goin', Mac, it'll work after awhile," said Neil anxiously.

Larry finally got a grip on the pencil, and began drawing a crooked line. "This is the trail from beyond the J Bar B," he said. "Yuh follow that to the rim." Then he made an X on the paper. Neil leaned forward.

"See that X?" Larry asked.

Larry's right hand sagged down as Neil leaned forward, Neil said:

"Yeah, I see it, Mac," Neil said. "What does—"

Neil was hunched very low and Larry's right uppercut hit him as squarely on the button as any fighter could have landed it. It was punched with every bit of strength Larry had left. Neil fell forward, with his head almost in Larry's lap.

Larry realized that the knockout was too temporary for him to expect Neil to be out very long. His right hand fumbled over Neil's back, and he got Neil's six-shooter from his holster. He couldn't hold it very tightly but when Neil sagged back, mumbling,

Larry hit him over the head.

He could hear Mulligan moving around the kitchen. Larry didn't know how many of them were still in the house—didn't care, as far as that was concerned. He managed to untie his feet and got up. He was walking on a pair of legs that didn't seem to belong to him. Then he took Neil's belt off, and proceeded to take his clothes. Neil was not a bit interested in the proceedings. Larry managed to dress himself and buckle on Neil's gun.

"You and me made a deal, Neil," he muttered, as he flexed his legs. From upstairs Mulligan called:

"How yuh comin' Jeff?"

"Open up, Mulligan," said Larry, knowing that his voice would be muffled enough to deceive Mulligan.

The trap door opened and Larry climbed the few steps. Mulligan didn't discover the deception yet. He picked the bottle off the table and started to pour some into a glass. "No luck, huh?" he asked. "Well, I didn't—"

THEN HE saw Larry. His jaw sagged and the bottle dropped from his hand. It crashed on the edge of the table, and Mulligan stood like a man paralyzed.

"If you make a sound, I'll shoot yuh, Mulligan," whispered Larry.

"Nobody here," said Mulligan. "Just me and Neil."

Larry relaxed and dropped the trap-door.

"Jeff Neil don't count," he said.

"Wh-what are yuh goin' to do, Larry?" Mulligan asked. "They're huntin' for yuh all over the country."

"Where's Faith Braden, Mulligan? Don't lie to me!"

"Upstairs," said Mulligan. "She—she ain't hurt. I'll get her for yuh, Larry."

"You and me, Mulligan. I wouldn't trust you an inch, you skunk."

Mulligan looked as though he was going to cry but led the way upstairs. The bedroom door was locked from the outside. Mulligan unlocked it and stepped aside, but Larry shoved him in ahead.

Faith was on the bed, tied hand and foot, a handkerchief had been shoved into her mouth, and taped from behind. She was awake, staring at them. "Cut her loose, Mulligan—fast!" Larry said.

Mulligan obeyed. Faith hadn't been tied as tightly as had Larry; but she was unable to get up unassisted.

"All right, Faith?" asked Larry, and she nodded with a grimace of pain.

"Lead the way down, Mulligan," said Larry. "We're goin' to borrow a couple horses for a while, and you'll saddle 'em."

"Sure, sure," replied the cook.

"Larry, what happened?" whispered Faith. "How did you get loose? Oh, I could hardly believe my eyes. They were going to kill both of us!"

"Yeah, I know, Faith. But they haven't—yet."

"They're all in town," she panted. "There's a meeting. Belle told me. She ordered a reward for you."

"A very sweet character."

"She said she loved you once."

"No! Belle Ames? Faith, that's funny. She loved me?"

"You never know about a woman, Larry."

"Maybe you're right—nor men either. Here's the stable."

"What happens to me?" asked Mulligan.

"You get all tied up for collection, Mulligan. Saddle up!"

"But, Larry!" said Faith, suddenly remembering. "They are looking for you! They'll kill you on sight. You've got to get away."

Larry looked at her closely.

"Would you care?" he asked.

"Larry!" she whispered. "I've always cared."

Larry grinned. "That's all I care about, Faith," he said.

THERE WAS plenty of activity in Broken Butte that night. It looked as though everybody in Penitentiary Valley was there. The meeting was being held in the dance-hall.

Chairs and benches had been moved in and the place was packed.

On the platform were Con Taylor, Belle Ames, Peewee Jones, Ed Thorsen, Harry North and others. Standing at the side of the platform was Nick Thorne, whom Belle had introduced as Nick Adams, her brother. Shell Turk was near him, standing, as was Ed Corwin. The sheriff took the floor.

"I asked you all to come here tonight because we need the assistance of everybody," he said. "I want every man and boy, able to ride, to help search this valley. You've all heard that Faith Braden is missing. Jim Braden has just offered five thousand dollars to anyone who finds her or who has evidence that will help us.

"The country has raised the reward to two thousand for Larry McCoy, dead or alive. Mrs. Ames has added a thousand to the reward and her brother, Mr. Adams, has also offered a thousand, making a total of four thousand for Larry McCoy. Whether Larry McCoy had anything to do with the disappearance of Faith Braden, we don't know. I would like to have Mrs. Ames say a few words to yuh."

The spotlight turned on Belle Ames.

"I am not a good speaker," she said quietly. "A lot of you folks don't like me. I'm sorry. But regardless of that, I feel that we must all work together in a case like this. We don't know what has happened to Faith Braden. But with Larry McCoy, desperate and hunted, we never know what a man like him may do. He might—"

Belle stopped, and she jerked her left hand to her throat. From back in the room a man let out a shout.

"My stars, here's that girl, Faith Braden!" he yelled. "And McCoy!"

Faith Braden and Larry McCoy were coming down the center aisle, walking slowly, looking straight ahead. No one made any move toward McCoy.

Neither Nick Thorne nor Shell Turk had moved. Ed Corwin seemed to be standing there with his eyes

shut. "Keep out of this, Con," Larry said calmly.

"All right, kid," said the sheriff.

"I've been a prisoner at the Diamond A for two days," Larry said. "I got away tonight and I released Faith Braden. They had her tied, too. This is a showdown, folks. Belle Ames has sold out to the sheep interests. That man ain't her brother—he's Nick Thorne. They were going to kill us."

"You devil!" screamed Belle Ames.

Where she got the gun, nobody knew, but she had it. Con Taylor knocked her off the platform and the gun went off. Men were diving in every direction and the room was in an uproar. Shell Turk went for his gun but Larry's forty-five was belching lead into the tall foreman of the Diamond A, and he was going down.

CORWIN was very slow in getting into action. Perhaps there were too many people between him and Larry McCoy. They split now. Belle Ames had torn loose and came straight at Larry as he swapped shots with Ed Corwin.

Larry's first bullet shocked Corwin, throwing him sideways, and Corwin's bullet struck Belle Ames, knocking her down over a broken chair.

Someone ran to find the doctor. Belle Ames was hard hit. Shell Turk was shot twice and his chances were nil. Corwin was unconscious. The people had forgotten the rewards for Larry McCoy. Larry went down to Shell Turk, who grinned up at him.

"How'd yuh get away, McCoy?"

"I out-smarted Jeff Neil, Turk. Want to tell the truth?"

"Yeah—I'd—like—to. The deal—is—played—out. Lift my—head."

"Larry, I held up that stage—a year ago. I—I handed you a shot of spiked whisky, took yore clothes and pulled the job. It—it was Belle's idea. She hated Braden—and she—she wanted you herself."

"Do you mean that Larry is innocent, Turk?" asked the sheriff.

Turk nodded and continued.

"Yeah, that's right, Con. Ed Cor-

win took yore clothes and tried to pull the job again yesterday but Bill Caswell got away. Corwin was the sheep-spy. Thorne bribed Jeff Neil to release Larry. Jeff used to work for Thorne and Thorne got him the job at the prison. It was Corwin who put on the mask and shot Braden at the ranch. Corwin is a fool—he didn't want Braden to send that wire to the penitentiary until we had Larry where the law couldn't get him. I—it's getting—dark. Why—don't—somebody—"

"I reckon somebody did," said the sheriff soberly. "How about you, Thorne? Want to talk?"

Thorne shook his head.

"Too much has already been said."

Con Taylor turned to Larry.

"Kid," he said huskily, "you said you came to get 'em—and yuh did."

Peewee Jones shoved his way through and under the crowd.

"Hyah, Peewee," grinned Larry.

"I'll be blasted!" exclaimed Peewee. "He spoke to me!"

The doctor came bustling in. Someone whispered to Larry:

"Faith's waitin' for yuh, Larry. I reckon she wants to go home."

"Go ahead kid," advised the sheriff.

"Thanks, Con. You'll find Jeff Neil in the cellar and Mulligan in the stable at the Diamond A. That completes the roundup."

"Wait a minute, Larry!" blurted Peewee. "Do you actually know a new way to git out of this valley?"

"Sure," said Larry. "Use a balloon."

Over at the Eagle Saloon, Bill Caswell, the stage-driver, leaned on the bar.

Honeymoon Hough came in and eased in beside Bill, helping himself to a drink at Bill's expense. Honeymoon didn't seem too happy. He took a folded piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Bill, who opened and read it. Then he tore it up.

"M' las' will 'n tes'ament," Bill said owlishly.

"Pa allus said I'd never have any luck worth mentionin'," sighed Honeymoon. "It's gettin' so yuh can't even depend on death any more."

A NEW NOVEL BY JOHN PRESCOTT

When Pete Block acquired the Running E, he thought he'd like to meet his neighbors — but he didn't expect to say howdy to a lovely girl who was also a fence-cutting menace



RUSTLER RIVER

I

AT A POINT where his fence-line ran parallel to a hill stream, Pete Block reined up and waited for his cowboy, Ruba. From this eminence he could see how his fence had been cut and how the cattle had been taken out. The tracks were so plain in the drying mud that he could make a fair count without examining them at close range. He was not as yet familiar with the full extent of his land, but he knew that this wild and rugged corner of it was well suited for the use to which it had been put.

Ruba's bronzed face held a melancholy cast and ends of his flaring black mustache drooped when he observed the tracks.

"Ah," he said. "So."

"Ah, so, hell," Pete Block said. "Fifty head if I'm a day old. And the fence cut clean through. Rates a lot more'n that."

Ruba's mustache quivered. "I simply say 'Ah' by way of exclamation, Senor Pedro. And I say 'So' because I recognize the fact of the loss. But why should I use fifteen words where two will serve?"

Pete Block dipped his hat and ran his hand across his forehead.

"Ruba! Ruba, we got a cut fence line and fifty head missin'. Let's get on with it. We're crossin' over."

Pete put his mustang into the water and Ruba came up beside him. Ruba's mustache points were drooping once again, but they failed to conceal the annoying amusement apparent in the turn of his lips.

"All right, what you laughin' at, Ruba?" Pete snapped.

"Oh, I am thinking of the Senorita Whitehead, which is not right, either, because she has hair as black as night itself."

"Ruba!"

"Oh, Senor Pete, do not be angry again; I am thinking of her because she owns the land which we are now approaching and it appears that your steers must be upon it."

THEY HAD come to the far bank and when they crossed the cut fence Pete drew up again and looked at Ruba.

"A woman owns this?" Pete suddenly felt uneasy. You could brass up to a man with a thing of this sort, but how could you approach a woman?

Pete and Ruba fired
at their elusive foes



Just then a figure walked from behind the hillock and stood there, watching them; and Pete knew by its grace and carriage that it was no man.

The state of affairs called for indignation, but here Pete was, sitting in his saddle and staring at this fresh and attractive girl, who held her bridle in her hands and smiled up at him. Ruba accomplished the introductions with many flourishes of his sombrero, and twitchings of his mustache.

"Ah, so, Senorita Whitehead; may I present to you Senor Pete Block, the new ranchero of the Running E?"

Ruba then regarded Pete. "Senor Pete, this one is the Senorita Celsa Whitehead, to whom I have referred. A fine name; yes, a truly fine and beautiful name!"

Pete became aware that something was expected of him. Both of these people were watching him with anticipation, yet he was in no mood to be beguiled. In fact, Ruba's exaggerated courtesy was vastly aggravating, and in some fashion seemed to smack of treason.

"My fence has been cut," Pete blurted, "and fifty head, more or less, has gone through. I figure they're over here somewhere."

Celsa Whitehead's smile diminished some, and Pete found himself studying her hands and wondering how it was she could keep them so white. This consideration caused him to shake himself vigorously, and to remove his hat and slap the dust out of it against his knee.

"I'm awfully sorry about the steers," she said. "I didn't know they'd gotten out. They weren't around when I cut the fence."

Pete Block stared. For a moment he wondered if he'd heard correctly, and was about to set it down as a figment of his imagination, when Celsa Whitehead waved her arm gracefully toward the stream.

"It's a bad time of year, Mr. Block; we've had a long dry spell and my own stream's gone for now.

When Old Man Emmet owned your place he used to take a section out of that fence for me during times like these, and after he died I meant to take it up with the new owner; but you were slow in coming, and the cattle had to drink."

Pete was getting a grip on himself now. "So, you just cut it," he said. "Just let your stock in; with no thought to mine. Why didn't you come around and ask?"

Celsa Whitehead's smile had now disappeared. In its place was an ominous set of face—bright, snapping eyes.

"I already told you. We had an emergency here. I had no way of knowing when you would assume ownership; I simply had to do what came to mind. I've pitched camp here for three days, waiting for you to come this way so I could tell you."

For the first time, Pete took his eyes off the girl and looked around. There was much evidence to support this new contention. Behind the horse there lay the embers of a fire, a bed-roll spread to one side of it; and cooking things had been placed in an orderly manner upon a tarpaulin.

Suddenly the girl blazed up. "Oh, I'll fix your fence for you, Mr. Block! I'll have my boys out here in the morning. I'll have them round up your stock, too, and deliver the whole blasted herd to your home pasture."

Pete Block stirred uneasily in the face of this attack. Confound it, he hadn't wanted anything like this. Damn it all, if Ruba'd only told him about this girl before they'd gotten in so deep. Here he'd come over the river filled to the neck with righteous wrath, and now this slip of a girl had twisted things to make him look like a dragon of some kind.

"All right," he said lamely, and at last, "that's fair enough." He nodded curtly at the girl and tapped Ruba's arm. "Come on, Ruba."

BUT RUBA seemed to be in no such hurry. His hands were crossed in a dejected manner upon his saddle pommel and the tips of his expressive

mustache were nearly meeting beneath his chin.

"Oh, so sad this is," he mourned. "How I have hoped you would be friends; and now you are hostile to one another. Only the other day my Carmencita and I, we were discussing it..."

"Ruba!" Pete Block yelled.

Celsa Whitehead coughed.

Pete rode off in hot, high rage and he was nearly to the ripped fence before Ruba caught up with him. Ruba's face was very animated now. "But, Senor Pete, we cannot go off like this. It is not polite for one thing; and for another she has had some very bad fortune these days."

"And, how about ours, if you don't mind my asking?" Pete said. "You call a cut fence and fifty missing head a blessing?"

"Of course not, but it is different with a lady. She has the dry spell and the worry of her animals. And she is short-handed, too—only last week the Senor Ed Rogers and the Senor Cliff Jorgenson leave her. And still she sits out on the hill to wait."

"They likely couldn't stand her tongue, those two," Pete said with faint satisfaction.

"Well, I do not know about that, but even so it is a great thing she does to wait."

They had crossed the creek again and Pete was staring at the prints in the mud when Ruba said these things. All at once, he saw something which they had overlooked before. Pointing with his hand, he glared at Ruba.

"You say your little angel was out there waiting for us? To tell us what she done about the fence? I'll agree with half of that—that she was waiting for us, but like as not to pass a warning of our coming. Because what she said don't match up with the facts. That was just a blind, Ruba; a damned, conniving, female blind. Our stock was driven off! Take a look at those horse prints!"

Ruba bent very low in his saddle, and studied the ground at length. "*Sapristi!* It is so. There have been

horses here."

"You're danged right there have," Pete said. "C'mon, we're goin' back again; to talk to that filly some more."

Ruba turned around, then shook his head. "I do not think so this time," he said. "Regard the dust."

Pete took a long while finding what Ruba had seen before him. And when he saw it he knew they'd never catch the girl. Between them and the moving cloud there lay half a mile and more of land; and the small hill rose empty in the morning sun.

II

PETE BLOCK'S boiling anger slowly gave way to a curious and mystifying wonder. Ever since he and Ruba had returned to the casa this state of mind had been growing in him, and now, two days later, it persisted, and continued still to thrive. For the first time in his life he was puzzled, and at a point where he could not conceive of any clear-cut plan of action.

Everything before this in his life had been simple and direct and easy to understand. As behooves young men with a goal in mind, he had worked hard and long, had saved his money, and had always looked forward to the day when some big spread in the hill or mountain country would be his. He had planned a long time for this, and while other opportunities had presented themselves he had always held out for what, in his mind, this place of Emmet's represented.

He had roamed the country west of the big Missouri for more months and years than he could readily recall, but he'd always known that he'd recognize the place when he came upon it. And Emmet's place, snug and sheltered beneath the Lincoln country timber of New Mexico, had been it. He had counted himself fortunate beyond calculation when he had found that it could be had from the late Emmet's estate, but he had surely not counted on a thing like this.

A lady rustler thrown in with the deal.

Pete Block knew a great deal of dealing with rustlers of the other gender, but how on earth did one go at a case like this?

It was less than useless to seek advice of Ruba; and even worse to hope for help from Ruba's wife, Carmencita. Ruba appeared clearly of the opinion that Celsa Whitehead could explain it all very easily if given the chance, and Carmencita's worry was not of the stolen stock at all, but of the more intimate and hair-raising concern of Pete's approach to Celsa Whitehead on a social basis.

"You should marry and have young, yes, you should," she would admonish him continually. And now, as he sat at the long table before the fireplace, and gazed out moodily upon the pine and cedar beyond the dooryard, she was at him once again upon that terrifying subject. Pete prized his bachelorhood above most things, and to have it assailed in this bald manner gave rise to a feeling close to panic.

"See how you treat that lovely *senorita*," Carmencita shouted at him from her cook stove. "Her animals are parched and you are calling her a thief." Round and heavy, but with little sign of useless fat upon her, Carmencita brandished the coffee pot with menace. "You men! You are all the death of us girls!"

"My God, Carmencita, you'd think I was to blame," Pete said plaintively. "Does it mean nothing to you that she cut our fence? And if that wasn't enough, that she ran our stock off, too?"

Carmencita dismissed this damning evidence with another flourish of the pot. "Pooh, she can explain it all. I have known her all her life; yes, I have known her since she was no bigger than a *pinone*, and she is as honest as the sun. The fence she maybe cut, as she has said to you, but the other I do not believe. No, she can explain it all."

Pete Block stood up and pushed the chair beneath the table, and started

toward the door. This business of having angry palaver with women was highly distasteful to him. It seemed that he had been doing little else since he had arrived at this place, and it was further distressing to realize that he was always coming out second best. Just now Carmencita had established him as one to be regarded with malevolence, while Celsa Whitehead was utterly without guilt, and in fact, seriously maligned by his attitude.

He was still shaking his head about this when he came outside and saw Ruba swinging his horse into the yard enclosure. The Mexican dismounted hastily and came toward Pete, his mustache appearing as a wreath of pleasure.

"Ho, *Senor Pete*, it is fixed; *si*, yes, the fence, she is now fixed as before. I have just this moment come from there."

"Yeah?" Pete said. "Well, that's a start. How about the stock? That all back, too?"

RUBA DUG at the ground with the toe of his boot. "Well...well, it is hard to say about that. There was no one there but me and all I see is the fence. But it is fixed for certain."

Pete rested his hands on his hips. "Ruba, what about tracks? Were there any cattle tracks coming back across?"

Ruba commenced to excavate with the other foot. "No. No, I saw none of those," he said reluctantly.

"Then I guess that's that," Pete said. He stared angrily around the yard, and beyond that toward the pines, standing straight and green against the warm, bright sky. Only one thing to do, that was certain.

"All right, we got to go, then. We got to go back over there again. C'mon."

Ruba moved slowly toward his horse. "I do not know, *Senor Pete*. She will not like it. I do not like it, either."

"I don't give a damn about that," Pete said. "I'm going to do what I like for a change, savvy?"

They took the forest trail to that farflung outpost of Pete Block's land. Pete did not look forward to whatever unpleasantness might lay for them beyond the fence-line, but the timber ride served to alleviate some of his misgivings.

You couldn't beat fine trees like these, he thought. You couldn't do it, no matter how you tried. A body could get on his horse, or on the new-built Santa Fe, if he chose, and ride all over God's creation, and he'd never find a place of such rare and never-ending beauty. That deep pine scent and dark serenity of the silent trees made a man think he didn't amount to anything at all; made him wonder if his small affairs weren't meaningless and picayune.

These great forests had been here long before he came along with all his tribulations, and they'd still be here for a thousand years and more beyond the time that he was gone. His place in the sun was less than brief when seen before these other considerations, and the day would come when his short occupancy would be forgotten, and the green trees would once again recover for themselves such marks as he had made upon the land. It made a man wonder in his head just why he was living anywhere at all.

They didn't waste any time at the fence when they came down from the forest and stepped their horses across the stream. Pete paused only long enough to see that it had been repaired in good order, and to flatten one segment for them to cross. On the other side, they headed into White-head land.

They went ahead with care and caution. Ruba had reported an absence of activity in that region, but that did not mean that things could not change drastically and swiftly. Pete was aware that they now composed an invading party, and that intensified the caution required in their situation. Perhaps it was that awareness, which made him able to greet the firing with a matter-of-fact ac-

ceptance, rather than the amazement exhibited by the Mexican.

A hundred yards beyond the hillock the shooting broke out. It angled in from both sides, somewhat ahead of them, and Pete's first thought was for their exposed position. They were in a bad way out there with nothing but level, somewhat rolling land about them, and they needed cover, quick.

"*Sapristi!*" Ruba said. "This is terrible! She is crazy!"

Pete whirled his horse and shouted as he spurred back toward the hill. "Crazy, hell, we should have known it. Head for the rise, Ruba! We got to have cover!"

That hundred yards was to Pete the longest distance he had ever traveled. They must have done it in a very short time, but it seemed to him that they would never get there. All around, the rifle fire barked and snapped, whipped the grass and yucca, and stirred the dust beneath. It occurred to him that the aim of the girl's crowd was off but a man could never be sure about a thing like that; not when his life was riding on the front bead sight.

Beyond the crest of the hill, they swung down and crept back up with their rifles. Ruba's mustache was bristling straight out now, with the ends quivering, as though each of the hairs was responding to the electric quality in the air. Ruba's eyes were black and inky and his dark, leathery face was as hard and set as the saddle on his horse. It pleased Pete to observe this reaction, and some of his impatience with the cowhand went away.

FROM THAT place they had a fair view of the land beyond, but even so the slope toward the stream placed them lower than the terrain further up. They were still exposed, but with their own rifles going now they could hope to keep the others wary.

There was not much to see and Pete had to fire where he thought the other shooting might be coming from. Now and then he'd spot movement in

the grass or brush, but he could never tell if he was doing any good or not. Altogether, it was a queer way to fight, and his uneasiness at their situation kept increasing. When the firing broke out loud and sudden to their rear he had the great fear that they had been outflanked, but when he swung around he saw the newcomer down beyond the stream, and firing off to one side of them, apparently joining them against the opposition.

Pete ducked down behind the crest of the hill and stared.

"Now, who in hell is that?" he said. "It looks as if he's sidin' us."

Ruba's eyes narrowed off in that direction. "I think it is the Senor Ed Rogers," he said presently. "I am not sure from this distance, but I think so."

"Ain't he one of those that used to work for Whitehead?" Pete said. "And quit? Or got himself canned?"

"Si, he is one of those," Ruba said. "But I cannot think what he is doing here; unless it is spite. Men are sometimes funny about their arguments with women."

Pete's mouth worked into a dry grin. "Do tell," he said. "Well, spite or otherwise, I'm glad the guy showed up. We got some leverage now."

Resuming his position on the crest, Pete was soon aware of just how effective Rogers' help was becoming. He had to depend on sound pretty much to reach his conclusions, but even by this method it soon appeared that the attack was lessening and drawing off. The firing reduced first on that side toward which Rogers was concentrating with his fire, and presently receded all along the line. In ten minutes the sound of it had backed off considerably, and when Rogers humped up to them it had ceased entirely.

"Ain't much of a place to make a new acquaintance," Pete said, "but I'm glad to shake your hand."

The man named Ed Rogers stooped down on his haunches alongside of Ruba. For a tall and solid man, he had an easy way of moving, and this squatting down seemed to require lit-

tle if any effort. Pete had not often seen a man like that.

"That's all right," Ed Rogers said. "I was just goin' by and heard the ruckus. I figured you were goin' at it with the Whitehead woman, and I was glad to lend a hand."

"Well, you come at just the right time," Pete said, "and you've got our thanks again. They had us in a bad spot."

Ed Rogers' wide face smiled. "Ain't the first time with that gal. She's good at gettin' folks in spots. I was just now comin' by to pick up some of my gear I'd left at her bunkhouse; there was no one around up there, and comin' by this way I heard the shootin'. I knew she was up to something then."

"She was up to something, all right," Pete said. "Cut our fence, first, and then she ran off fifty head of stock."

"She is no thief," Ruba said glumly, but without conviction.

Pete ignored him. A thought had just occurred to him, and as he studied the face of Ed Rogers, now turned in the direction from which the firing had come, it gained attraction. He gave words to this thought in a careful and circuitous manner.

"I suppose, now that you left her, that you're pullin' your freight to some other job of work," he said.

Ed Rogers laughed softly. "A feller's got to eat, that's certain," he said. "I'd figured I'd drift on down toward the Pecos. This is good country up here, and I prefer it, but I can't abide that woman."

PETE HUNCHED around and pulled his paper and tobacco out. He poured a shuck for himself, then passed the stuff around. Lighting up, he squinted through the soft wisp of blue smoke.

"Well, now," he said, "I surely do hate to see a man leave country he's got a feeling for. I know I wouldn't like to do it. Makes you wonder if that man wouldn't reconsider, if he had himself a place where he was

more appreciated. That way he could still be around these fine hills and trees."

Ed Rogers built his smoke with care and deliberation. His big, wide fingers held the paper in a delicate and feeling way, and once again Pete had the notion that this man's grace and ease of motion belied his solid size and apparent awkwardness.

"Why, come to think of it," Rogers said, "that ought to have a good deal of appeal for that man. I figure that man'd be a fool not to take the offer."

Looking at the smoke again, Pete said, "He'd likely fit in pretty well, too, especially when he found that the land he was supposed to ride bordered pretty close upon land he'd ridden in the past. To keep an eye peeled on certain disturbing signs."

Ed Rogers gave the tip of the shuck a final twist.

"That ought to please him considerable," he said. "Ain't nothin' like ridin' in country you're familiar with."

"I reckon we see eye to eye," Pete said, and he cupped a light and held it out.

Ed Rogers took his drag, and smiled. "Thanks, boss," he said.

Just then Ruba slipped down from the crest of the hill, where he had gone to keep an eye upon the surrounding heaves of land.

Pete looked at him. "Well?"

Ruba laughed. "They have gone," he said. "From far off, I see them go."

"Damn it, you should have spoke up," Pete said. "Was that girl with them?"

"Oh, *si*, she is with them, too," Ruba said. "But she was not hit. No, she was all right."

III

IN A SHORT while Pete found that Ed Rogers was a good man to have around. Ever since Pete had taken over the Running E he had had in mind the signing on of a few more hands, but Rogers seemed to be so capable that he got to toying with

the idea of not getting any more on the job right away. He didn't like to spread themselves too thin, but his financial load was great at just that time, and perhaps it might work out all right for a time.

If Rogers or Ruba commenced to complain of the work they carried, why, then he'd have to do it, sure, but neither of them seemed to mind it, and Rogers, especially, appeared to enjoy it as though he had all the help he wanted. Just went to show how a man would work out if he was treated right.

With Rogers on the job, Pete felt more secure about future depredations, but there was still the rankling matter of the fifty head or so which had been run off in the beginning. If Celsa Whitehead had only been a man it would have been a simple matter to augment his slender forces with those from other ranches round about, or to seek help from the local sheriff's office. But he knew, that with a woman, such a thing was out. A man couldn't gang up on no girl in posse fashion, and yet it appeared that his own strength of numbers was too weak to force an issue as they had tried before. The only present hope seemed to lie in questioning her alone.

After a solitary morning meal one day, he announced his intention as casually as he could.

"I'm going over to Whitehead's to see about that stock," he said to Carmencita, who was in the living room with him. "I don't know how long I'll be gone, but don't wait dinner for me."

At the wood stove, Carmencita turned around and looked at him. Her face was as round as a big old mountain moon and when she smiled the corners of her lips appeared to go straight on up beyond her ears. "Oh, *senor*, that is *bueno*, *si*, yes, that is *bueno* for certain. I think all the time you should do that. When I contemplate that poor bird, that poor humming-bird, alone in her great house, I want to weep; but now it is good."

Pete clutched the back of his chair

with one hand. "I said I'm goin' to see about that stock. That stock she stole."

Carmencita came part way across the room and scrutinized him closely, and Pete had the weary and helpless sensation that she hadn't heard a word he'd said.

"But, senor, you cannot go like that, in your dirty clothes. You must go to see her as a great *rico*; yes, indeed, a clean shirt and boots. She is a lady."

Pete's grip on the chair shot flashes of pain into his wrist and arm. "This ain't goin' to be no social call. I'm going to see about our beef. Remember that? And the fence? And the shooting?"

It did not seem, however, that Carmencita recalled these things; or if she did, she regarded them as matters of little weight. "But, Senor Pete, one does not call upon a lady in barnyard filth. What will she think? Her heart will be cold to you like a stone."

Pete opened his mouth for more argument, then changed his mind and closed it. Instead, he jerked his hat off the hook, clamped it on his head and stalked toward the door.

"Just don't wait dinner for me, that's all," he said when he opened it. "And tell Ruba where I'm goin'. I think Ed'll stay out at the line shack tonight, but you tell Ruba. Is he around?"

Carmencita folded her arms and stared at them. "I do not know where that one is," she said. "He has been gone for some hours."

"Well, tell him when he comes back. He didn't say where he was going, did he? He don't generally take off without some word."

"No," Carmencita said, and this time Pete was aware of an attitude of restraint in her. "I do not know. He simply went away."

THIS TIME Pete did not take the forest trail. He went around to the road and followed it to the main entry of the Whitehead Place. It was considerably longer and more round-

about, but he wanted to give his visit a peaceful aspect, and not invite the sort of reception he had had before.

The road around was in the open, and was hot and choked with dust. In their position on the forest edge, he had not been very conscious of the heat or of the effect of the long dry spell; but out here the full force of heat and sun struck down upon him. The soft white powder layering his face and hands was soon cut and streaked by streams of perspiration, and his clothes assumed the coloring of a flour bag. The thought of his appearance, had he complied with Carmencita's wishes, afforded him a mild amusement, but beyond that his thoughts were concerned with his growing realization of the need for rain. They surely did need it down in here, he thought over and over again. They surely did need it bad.

When the road approached the Whitehead stretch of country he came upon a side-trail leading into it. It was like any other trail or road thereabouts and the only difference was in the placement of a small, weathered board upon a post, which bore the legend, JUD WHITEHEAD. Even that might have been misleading to the casual rider unless he remembered, as Pete did, that Jud had been Celsa's father in his lifetime.

This road, or trail, more sinuous than the one which he had left, rose and fell through pinyon-stunted hills, and did not afford him long-range vision. But after a mile or more of this the road raised slightly, and coming to the top of a level rise, Pete saw it leading straight away from him and terminating in a grove of thick, high cottonwoods, within which the outlines of the *casa* were clearly visible.

As he came beneath the spreading and generous trees Pete saw Celsa Whitehead and a cowhand watching his approach from the gallery of the *casa*. This rambling building appeared to have the seasoned quality and serenity of age, and its owner seemed to typify this unruffled permanence as

she sat there in a hide-backed chair, regarding him. Despite the heat, she looked very calm, and not at all warm or uncomfortable in the range levis and man's white shirt that she was wearing. In fact she seemed so composed and cool that Pete became more aware of his own discomfort and appearance; in some way this implied that he was trespassing, and that it was the girl, not himself, who had been put upon.

To his further irritation, Celsa Whitehead's words of greeting tended to bear out this consideration. "I expect it's a good thing you came by the road this time instead of over the river; I was wondering when you'd show some sense."

Pete dismounted slowly and stood awkwardly before the gallery.

"I don't know why you'd say a thing like that. It wasn't me that started all the shooting."

"We have a right to protect our land against invasion," Celsa Whitehead said. She looked sidewise at the puncher, who lounged against a post. "He came straight in, did he, Max?"

The man named Max picked at his teeth with a stick. "If he'd of left the road, Miss Whitehead, he'd been dead by now. I watched him all the way."

Pete's neck became warm. "A side-winder, huh. I figure it would take more'n you to stop me from going where it pleases me."

Max pulled his hat down and tossed the stick away. "Say—"

"This is not the bunkhouse," Celsa Whitehead said. "You've done your part, Max, if you don't mind."

Max relaxed against the post again. "I don't mind; I just don't like the way he talks."

Pete began to get a grip on himself. "If you've a mind to change it, Max, why go ahead and try."

This time Celsa Whitehead stamped her foot, a trim thing, shod in a boot extremely small.

"I said this isn't the bunkhouse. And I mean it for you, too, Mister Block, though I suppose I could expect little better from you."

WARMTH in Pete's neck spread to his ears. "Well, fact is, I didn't come here to jaw either. I come about my stock."

"Ain't no stock of yours around here," Max said.

"I figure you're wrong by fifty head," Pete said, watching Celsa Whitehead's face. Were her eyes blue or gray?

"We're no thieves or liars here," she said to him. "I said I'd return every head we found, but there's nothing here, like Max has said."

"Well, ma'am, I beg to differ with you. There's no tracks coming back across my stream."

This time Celsa Whitehead's eyes were neither blue nor gray, but the hardened frostiness of deep-water mountain ice. "The implication of that tells me you believe we ran them off," she said. She was standing very straight, very erect, and though she was not tall it seemed to Pete that she towered over him.

"Facts are facts," he said stolidly.

"Well, they aren't here, and we didn't drive them off. And now, Max, you may show this person the road."

"A pleasure, Miss Whitehead, a pleasure indeed." Max left the post and came around and mounted up. "All right, let's move."

On his horse again, Pete looked down at the girl standing on the gallery floor. Never had he seen such fury; as straight and deadly as a bayonet she stood.

"I'll just have to come back again," he said quietly. "I'm slowly getting a bunch together and there's them among 'em who won't shy to making an excursion over here. Ed Rogers is one."

"If you've got him over there I must say you're in suitable company," Celsa Whitehead said. "Trouble-making's his specialty."

"I expect it depends on who he works for," Pete said mildly.

"When he comes over, you tell him to bring that fifty bucks he owes me," Max remarked. "He run out on a card debt."

"Bunkhouse poker ain't no affair of mine," Pete said.

"It is to the man who loses," Max said. "All right, c'mon, let's go. We got to give the air around here a chance to freshen."

Pete went directly home. It was hot, but he rode hard, and he was mad. He was madder then he'd ever been before, mad in the way that only a woman can make a man; that raging, can't-do-nothing, frustrating kind of madness.

Slamming into the ranch-yard, he swung down and hurried toward the house. Carmencita, as ever, was at her stove, but Ruba was not there. "Where is he?" he said straight off.

"Where is who, Senor Pete?" Carmencita said, turning around.

"Where's Ruba?"

"Why, Senor Pete, as I say only a minute ago, he is gone."

"My God, Carmencita, I've been away for three hours!"

Carmencita shrugged, and smiled benignly. "Time—what is time? It is all the same, and Ruba, he is still away. Were you pleasant with the senorita? Such a one she is."

Pete's hoarse croak nearly strangled him. "Pleasant? If you can call a cattle war pleasant. That's what we've got now."

"A war? But who wants one of those?" Carmencita waved her fat hands in despair. "You men! Always fighting!"

Pete went outside.

He took time to rub his mustang down, turn it into the corral and saddle up a fresh one. There might be trouble up somewhere ahead, and it didn't pay to take chances with whatever it might be.

IT WAS noon or thereabouts when he got going. He had in mind the searching out of Ruba first, but then it occurred to him that since he had no notion where that man might be, it would be better to go on up to the line shack and look for Ed Rogers would be around there somewhere and the two of them could hunt for Ruba.

Going up that way, he soon became aware again of his lack of familiarity with that section of his land. He had long intended to make a thorough examination of it in Ruba's company, but events had been such as to prevent it. He reflected that there was so little that he really knew about that part that any deviation from the forest trail would get him lost.

But the line shack was not hard to locate. It stood squat and solid, and blending with the woods around it, in a little clearing at the end of the forest trail.

There was a horse browsing at the grass outcrop in the pole corral behind the log-sided building, and as he neared the place Pete saw that it was Ruba's. At the moment it seemed like a perfectly natural thing and it didn't occur to him to question it; in fact, it somewhat pleased him to believe that Ruba was making the rounds on his own initiative.

IV

WHEN HE stepped across the door-sill, though, all that quickly went away. It was quiet in that place, yet he sensed the presence of another, but it was a moment before Pete's eyes became accustomed to the darkness and found Ruba lying in the corner bunk. His dark face was shining wet with sweat and the left sleeve of his denim shirt was red and thick with blood.

"Ruba!" Pete said.

Ruba's face formed a ghastly smile. "Ah, Senor Pete, you come at last. Si, you are here now."

Pete jerked a box-chair across to the bunk, dragged a water bucket from its stand, and sat down, slowly peeling Ruba's sleeve.

"All right, now. Just take it easy. Don't try to talk. We'll get this patched up, then you can give it to me. By God, that woman's gone too far this time. I ain't a gentleman no more."

Ruba made a heaving motion to rise, and Pete pushed him back. "Now look, I just told you to lie easy; can't

fix it if you're not lying still."

"But, Senor Pete, you must listen; it is not like that at all. I have this idea, *sabe?* Carmencita, she give it to me—"

"All right, it isn't like that, and Carmencita gave you the biggest idea in the world, but keep still anyway."

"But, Senor Pete—"

"Shut up!"

Ruba lay back and spoke very quietly. "Senor Pete; it was not the Whitehead people, it was Rogers."

A while later Pete came out into the rain. When that had commenced he had no idea, but for a moment, as he made his way to his horse, he was fully conscious of this rain and it occurred to him that he had rarely seen one like it. Solid water coming down, it seemed; coming down in leaden volleys, its weight and mass so great that its descent was purely vertical.

Headed toward the stream to intercept Rogers if he could, his mind went over the things which Ruba had finally explained to him. Rogers was a slick one, that was certain; gunning up on their side as he had, yet managing to insinuate himself into their confidence, and make off with God only knew how many head of cattle.

And his supposed patrolling of this isolated area had given him free rein to go about it as he pleased; and taking the stuff across the Whitehead line had neatly placed the blame on other hands. Whatever had made Carmencita and Ruba suspect all this even Ruba did not seem to clearly understand, but Ruba had trailed Rogers toward that sector and had caught him at it; and had caught himself a bullet in the shoulder. How he had managed to make his way to the line shack was another thing that was not clear; but then it was becoming more obvious all the time that Ruba was a man of determination.

Just how he would ever make his apologies to Celsa Whitehead, Pete Block had no idea whatsoever. In fact, it had no place in his consideration of the moment, but there it was and he could not ignore the thought.

It was quite easy to see how Rogers had exploited her need for water, very neat and very competent. And in addition, complicating Pete's problems.

He knew that Rogers, if he was still running off another portion of the stock, as Ruba said when he had come upon him, would have slow going toward the stream in weather such as this. There was, of course, the outside chance that he had panicked and taken flight after leaving Ruba for dead upon the ground, but it did not seem to Pete that he would do that. It appeared, rather, that his purpose would be intensified by murder, and that he'd stick to what he'd started.

ALL THIS thinking in the rain came abruptly to an end as he came out upon the stream bank. The muddy, swollen bulk of water thrashed through its bed in a roaring river, flowing beyond its normal course and paving long stretches of the banks in mud. On the far side the standing fence was visible, partially sunk in surging water, and he knew that Rogers had not yet made his crossing.

Turning back, he headed up the sloping bank toward the forest once again. This time, though, instead of back-tracking on the trail he'd come upon, he struck out in what he thought would be the direction toward the place where Ruba had been shot. He had not been among the dripping trees for fifteen minutes before he heard the sound of cattle above that of the driving rain.

It was simple after that. He'd found his man and everything went in an automatic way. He staked his horse out in a grove of bushy cedars and walked back toward the origin of the sound. When Rogers came in sight at the head of the slowly moving mass Pete stepped out from behind a big pine bole and waved at him. Something about Rogers' position in relation to the herd should have given him a warning, but at the moment he didn't think about it.

Rogers came up and loomed above

him on his horse. Rogers was smiling, and for the moment Pete let it ride. If Rogers thought he was only cruising around, so much the better.

"Hi, Pete," Rogers said, "sure come up wet in a hurry." He glanced back at the herd, commencing to mill around him. "I found this bunch off in the timber and I figured I'd better get 'em out before lightning did it for me."

"Yah," Pete said, "they get spooky in a storm. Quite a crowd."

"Well, they was all hangin' around back in there."

"Sure is funny how they're all prime stock, ain't it? Almost like they sense quality in one another."

Pete could not tell if Rogers' eyes narrowed or not; but Rogers swung his head around and glanced idly at the herd again. "Do look pretty good at that. Guess it's a good thing I come upon 'em."

"I ought to raise your pay for this," Pete said. "You ain't seen Ruba in your travels, have you?"

"Ruba? No, I ain't seen him since morning. Could have used him, though."

Pete let his right hand slip down below his belt line. "Seems to me he's been used enough for one day."

That time Rogers looked hard at Pete, and Pete could tell from the other's eyes that each knew what the other did.

"It took you a long time, fella," Rogers said in a flat voice.

"That's because I'm trustin' by nature."

"I don't always pay to be that way."

"No, I guess it don't." Pete stood squarely on both feet and eyed Rogers warily. Rogers' horse was broadside on, and his hand was drifting from the bridle. "Any time you say," Pete said.

"You want it that way, huh? A sorry way to go."

It seemed that everything exploded all at once. It seemed to Pete that lightning struck in the very place he stood, but in the space of time that

followed he knew that lightning never came on wings of lead, nor did its voice speak in staccato barks of sound. As his arm burned in sudden heat he recognized the penalty of assuming that Rogers had played his game alone, and he recalled that a man named Cliff Jorgenson had been associated with Rogers on the Whitehead range. The face of this new man appeared briefly in the brush across from him, and then sank down again as Pete wrenched his gun loose and fired point blank at him.

Whatever else that sudden, opening shot had done, it had struck insanity into the already spooky herd. Dodging behind his pine bole, Pete looked out upon the wild and tossing horns, cascading past him in blind stampede. Some fifty feet away he saw Ed Rogers struggling in the middle of it, his horse being swept before the savage horde as though it floundered in a murderous river.

FOUR DAYS later Pete was kicking around the house in an agony of indecision. His sense of guilt was painful in the extreme and he had nearly reached the conclusion that he must do at once what honesty demanded.

Now when he needed Ruba most, he was gone again.

"Gone! Gone! With his arm in a sling he is gone, and how should I know where?" Carmencita said. "He is always gone. For what do you want him? To get him filled with more holes?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Pete said. "I been thinking about going over to the Whitehead place again and I want him with me."

For the first time in days Carmencita's great smile returned, and she cooed at him with warmth. "Ah, Senor Pete, at last you have sense in your head."

"I just mentioned the bare possibility of going over there, that's all. So, don't go getting ideas."

"Why, senor, I have no ideas; no, I have not an idea in my head. But this time you put on your fine clothes,

no? Perhaps, if you do not appear as a scoundrel she will not treat you as one."

Whether it was from whim or weariness Pete could not tell, but he allowed Carmencita to propel him toward his room, from which he presently emerged, dressed suitably enough to evoke murmurs of admiration from Ruba's wife. And just as he went outside, to make the trip alone, Ruba himself returned with a dismal expression.

"Senor Pete," he said without dismounting. "I think you should come with me. The fence, it is down again."

"By God," Pete said, "she had a hand in it after all! And I was set to forgive her. C'mon, Ruba, we ain't done with this yet."

"But, Senor Pete—Senor Pete! Permit me to explain!"

Whatever it was that Ruba was going to explain was lost on Pete for he was already pounding out on the forest trail.

Out of the forest, he sloshed through the stream and crossed the flattened fence. He did not bother to stop to see just where it had been cut; it was enough to know it was down again.

Surprisingly, and not at all in the manner of a criminal, Celsa Whitehead sat astride her horse on the far side of the hillock as she had on that first day of meeting. She surveyed him pleasantly, and until he saw the cattle herd approaching the doubts were gnawing at him once again. But the cattle were his own.

Drawing up beside her, he yelled: "Say, those are mine!"

Celsa Whitehead continued to smile at him. "You're so wise. Imagine, being able to read your own brand."

"Now, look here," Pete said. "I was all set to make amends, and now I see I wasn't wrong at all. That herd of steers is mine."

"Quite right," the girl said. "Wynn Byfield, my neighbor on the other side, found them on his land. They'd been driven clean across mine and onto his. I expect that's why we

couldn't find them here. That's Max driving them back for you."

Pete took a long, slow look before he spoke again. There was something very wrong here that didn't meet the eye. Maybe... but still, there was that fence. Ruba came up as he pointed out this fact.

"Except for my fence being down again, I guess you got a story. Rogers and his pal did it once or twice, I figure, but not this time."

Celsa Whitehead folded her slender hands upon her saddle horn.

"And you're quite sure I did it? One time I'll admit to."

"Senor Pete," Ruba said quietly.

"I'll handle this if you don't mind, Ruba."

"But, senor, the fence is down, yes; but I did not say it was cut. You did not allow me to finish."

ALL AT once Pete's mind went beyond Ruba's simple statement, understood the implication.

"The rain," he said slowly. "The rain—in the stream."

"Ah, si!" Ruba exclaimed. "That is it exactly. She is washed completely down. There you have it."

Pete did not look at Celsa Whitehead. "You could have told me that, Ruba. Instead of letting me come out here like this."

Ruba shrugged. "But, you were coming anyway, is that not so?"

"That's got nothing to do with it," Pete snapped.

"Ho, that is for you to decide, senor." Ruba removed his great hat and flourished it before them. "Pardon, please, but I should assist the Senor Max with the stock."

Pete followed Ruba's receding figure until his eyes ached; and then Celsa Whitehead's voice brought his head around. "Well, Peter Bloch, you were about to say?"

Pete gave a start. "Was I? I was?"

"According to Ruba, you were."

"Well, as a matter of fact. As a matter of fact—" By golly, her eyes were blue at that.

The GENT FROM



The man dropped
his branding iron
and drew his gun

MONTANA

Nick Breyne rides into a hotbed of Texas brand blotting

with a brace of sixguns to back up his bid for justice!

A Novel by OSCAR SCHISGALL



I

AT THE beginning nobody spoke to the stranger who drifted into the saloon for a drink. The other men at the bar regarded him curiously, almost suspiciously. It was the same strained uncertainty with which they viewed all new-comers to the town of Cinder Center.

The stranger was young and lean and browned by the sun. The dust in his clothes indicated that he had traveled far across the Panhandle that day. As he put down his glass, he turned to rest his elbows on the bar.

"Any of you gents happen to know where I can find the Double Eight Ranch?" he asked the men beside him.

Instantly there was a stiffening about him. Perhaps he didn't notice it, but conversation ceased abruptly.

One cowpuncher—a bald, middle-

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A Son of the Northern Range Goes West to

aged man whose bowed legs formed a kind of hoop—stepped closer to the newcomer. His eyes narrowed as he thrust his head forward.

"How come, stranger," he asked quietly, "you're hunting the Double Eight outfit?"

The lean man at the bar shrugged. "I hear it's run by a family by the name of Breyne. Seein' as how that happens to be my own name, too—Nick Breyne—I figured I'd look them up. Maybe we're related. I heard tell, up where I come from in Montana, that I had some cousins down here."

The bald man, beginning to frown, exchanged a sharp glance with another cowpuncher. Even the poker game at the corner table had stopped, and the players were staring over their cards.

"So your name's Breyne, is it?" slowly said the bald man. "And you just *happened* to hear tell you had cousins down thisaway, hey?"

"That's it. Why?"

"Well, son—" Suddenly the man's voice hardened; a note of anger throbbed in his words. "Cal Breyne can gather all his kinfolks, if he has a mind to, but that won't prevent the rest of us from askin' for a show-down! And when it comes, we're goin' to run Cal clean across the Border, if he lives that long!"

It wasn't only what the bald man said; it was the enraged manner in which he spoke that startled Nick Breyne. He widened his gray eyes in astonishment.

HE LOOKED from the middle-aged cowpuncher to other men, and everywhere he encountered a somber glare of hostility.

"What the devil!" he muttered, pushing his sombrero back on unruly brown hair. "I don't get this, gents. You all seem lined up against this here Cal Breyne. How come?"

"We're lined up against him," vehemently replied the bald man. "Just like we'd be lined up against any oth-

er coyote who'd go changing brands!"

Nick Breyne's expression changed. He straightened; a hint of hardness came into his features.

"Reckon," he said, "I ought to resent that, mister, and sort of stick up for my kinsfolk." He paused; it was a tense pause. Then his lips twisted slightly, and he added more casually, "Still and all, though, I don't aim to get into a fight for an hombre I never met up with, even if his name *is* the same as mine. Not, leastways, till I get a chance to look into this business. Might as well tell you, though, that I never yet heard of a Breyne who was crooked."

Clearly the bald-headed man had nothing further to say. He swung to the bartender, ordered a drink, and ignored Nick Breyne.

But the young man touched his elbow. "Look here," he urged. "I aim to ride out to the Double Eight tonight. If Cal Breyne asks me who's been sayin' all these things about, who shall I tell him?"

"My name," the bald man all but spat out, "is Idaho Parson! And don't forget to say that any more brand-changin' and we're comin' with guns smoking!"

Nick Breyne was teetering on the edge of a fight with this Idaho Parson, and he knew it. But, he decided that such a step would be futile. It would serve no purpose either with him or with Cal Breyne.

So, somewhat to the disgust of a few cattlemen who were hopefully watching, he shrugged, tossed a coin to the bar, and walked out of the saloon.

It was dark. Stars hung glamorous in the Texas skies, but Nick Breyne didn't glance at them. He frowned as he lifted the reins of his piebald cayuse from the hitch-rack. The horse, like the man, was dusty and covered with lather.

"Hey, stranger!"

The low, tight voice spoke behind him just as he raised a foot to a stir-

Side a Namesake Branded as a Widelooper!

rup. Breyne glanced around. A slim, under-sized cowpuncher with rounded shoulders hurried toward him from the saloon door. When he stood beside Nick, the thin little man whispered uneasily:

"You really kin to Cal Breyne?"

"Ain't sure yet. That's just what I have a hankering to find out. Why?"

The man gulped hard. He sent a quick look at the saloon doors. Turning back, he drove out unsteadily.



NICK BREYNE

"I'm Rufe Gunnison. I used to be a horse wrangler over on the Double Eight. Only I got into a fight a few months back, and somebody put a bullet in my belly and—finished me. There—there's somethin' I wanted to tell you."

"Well?"

"What Idaho Parson just mentioned to you— Gunnison jerked his head toward the saloon door. "Don't believe him! Cal Breyne ain't no crook!"

"You seem pretty sure."

"I am! I worked for him nigh on to seven years and I ought to know.

Cal Breyne is as square a shooter as you'll meet up with anywhere, any time!"

"Then how come he's got himself this ornery reputation as a brand changer?"

"Oh, some of these hombres have found their strays on the Double Eight spread, with the brands changed. That's true enough. It's plumb easy to change brands hereabouts. There's the Double Circle Ranch—one of the biggest in this part o' Texas—and there ain't anything easier than for a running iron to change that Double Circle to a Double Eight. And then there's the Bar O over west about fifteen miles from here. If you got any talent with an iron you can change the Bar O to a Double Eight, too."

Nick peered at the small man intently. "Yet you're sure Cal Breyne never changed brands?"

"I'd be willing to swear to it!" fervently declared Rufe Gunnison. He stopped, awkwardly shifted his weight from foot to foot. "I'm telling you this, stranger, so that if you're kin to him, I'm hopin' you'll go out there in a real friendly spirit."

Nick Breyne considered a moment, then lifted a hand to his saddlehorn. He said quietly, "Thanks, Gunnison. Mighty white of you to tell me." He swung into the saddle. "How do I get to the Double Eight?"

"If you follow the trail due south out o' town, you can turn west at the first cross-trail. But that's the long way around." Gunnison lifted an arm to point toward a low crescent moon that floated over hills. "Head straight thataway, if you don't mind crossing some badlands, an' you can be on the Double Eight spread inside two hours."

"Thanks," said Breyne. "I won't forget to tell Breyne that Rufe Gunnison is his friend."

Then he loped off.

It couldn't have been much after nine when Nick Breyne rode his pie-

bald cayuse into the badlands. Following Gunnison's directions, he moved always toward the crescent moon—like a mariner guiding his course by the stars.

After he had ridden for two hours, he decided he must have lost his way, because he was still in badlands, with no range in sight. He stopped his horse and looked about uneasily.

He wasn't afraid of being lost, but he disliked reaching the Double Eight after everybody had gone to sleep.

"Reckon," he muttered to the cayuse, "we been makin' a mistake by followin' the moon. After all, the moon moves some in two hours. Let's try bearin' left."

So he set out again. And twenty minutes later, reaching the rim of a wide hollow that was littered with rocks, he saw something that made him draw rein with a gasp.

Far below him, in the bottom of the saucer, a small fire burned. A man was squatting and holding something in the fire—something long and thin, looking like a branding iron.

There were half a dozen cows around the solitary figure. Most of them stood watching dumbly. But one, expertly tied and thrown, lay writhing on the ground a few feet behind the man. In the shadows beyond stood a horse.

As Nick Breyne stared, the man rose from the fire. He was huge, and he had a massive head of red hair that was unusual even when seen from a distance.

With the glowing tip of his branding iron extended, he went to the cow on the ground, bent over it, and did something to its brand—something that brought a squeal of pain from the animal.

"I'll be doggoned!" whispered Nick Breyne.

II

BREYNE looked keenly at the brand-blotter in the hollow, for he had a sudden wild suspicion that it wasn't mere coincidence which had

brought him here. He didn't believe in accidents of this kind—accidents that plunged you into the thick of secret range trouble.

"Gunnison must have figured I'd stumble on this," he mumbled to himself. "He wanted me to see it; though why, I don't yet *sabe*."

He sat very still, keeping his horse motionless in the shadows of boulders. The man below finished the job of branding the first cow. When he had tossed the iron aside, he released the creature, let it bound away, bawling.

Then he roped another. With miraculous speed and efficiency he threw it, tightened the rope. He picked up the branding iron and returned to squat beside the fire.

"Yes," Nick Breyne muttered, "Gunnison sent me here on purpose, all right! That's why he looked so nervous."

It explained, too, the fact that he hadn't yet found the Double Eight Ranch. In all probability this wasn't even the short-cut Gunnison had assured him it would be.

But Nick Breyne didn't care about that now. What he was witnessing was by far more important than any short cut to Cal Breyne's outfit. Of its own accord his hand sank to the six-gun in his holster, and he half drew it.

"Reckon the best thing I can do for this community—and for Cal Breyne—is go down and make that hombre grab for the sky."

Nick Breyne dismounted. He tossed his horse's reins over a yucca. Moving cautiously and without sound, he started down the slope into the hollow.

Breyne's nerves were strained and thumping as he lurched from one boulder to another. The red-haired figure was changing brands on the second cow now. Who he might be, Nick Breyne didn't know. He hardly supposed, however, that it was Cal Breyne, the owner of the Double Eight.

"Maybe, though," Nick Breyne told himself, "it's somebody who works

for the Double Eight. No telling." He would know any moment now.

His face had become tough. There was in its lines strength that hadn't been visible when he had talked to the men in the Cinder Center saloon. With the six-gun in his hand he was approaching the last of the rocks that could conceal him. At that instant, perhaps because he stepped on gravel, the man in the hollow heard him.

The fellow whirled around. He dropped the branding iron, he stared for a fraction of a second, then seized a six-gun at his hip and yanked it out.

"Who's that?" The voice, sharp and frightened, cracked through the stillness like a shot.

"Put that shootin'-iron away, hombre," Nick Breyne retorted, still crouching behind a rock. "I got you covered!"

"Who—who in blazes are you?"

"You'll have a good look-see soon as you reach for the clouds. Come on—stretch!"

The red-haired man had no intention of obeying. Possibly he saw Nick Breyne's sombrero over the moonlit boulder. He jerked up his six-gun and fired. As the weapon spat flame, lead clicked on the face of the rock.

At the same time the brand blotter started backing toward his horse. Nick Breyne saw clearly what he planned to do. He'd leap into the saddle and gallop away, leaving the cows where they were.

"Stand still," Nick Breyne yelled. "Or I'll drop you!"

The only response he evoked was another shot. This time he heard the whine of a bullet at his left.

He was more than seventy yards from the stranger. It was too far for accurate shooting and too far to prevent the fellow's dashing away. So Nick Breyne sucked in a sharp breath, jerked his sombrero lower over his eyes, and lunged out from behind the boulder. He ran forward boldly, the six-gun at his hip.

Two more shots greeted his appearance.

AT SEVENTY yards, however, the red-haired man knew it would be hard to hit his target. So he spun around and raced for his horse.

That was when Nick fired. He sent three bullets at the man. On the second he saw the fellow stumble, stagger to his right. But he recovered instantly, seized his saddle-horn, and pulled himself to the horse's back.

Once mounted, he yelled, "I don't know who you are, hombre, but you've sure let yourself in for a heap o' trouble!" He accentuated the words with another shot that ripped gravel out of the ground six inches from Nick Breyne's right boot. Then he jerked his horse around and went galloping wildly toward the far end of the deep-cut hollow.

When he was gone, Nick Breyne looked around with a scowl. He reholstered his gun and walked slowly toward the half dozen cows near the fire. All he saw, bore the Double Circle brand. One was still hog-tied—the cow whose brand had just been altered. Nick squatted and examined the changed mark.

It was now a Double Eight.

Old Sheriff Anderson of Cinder Center, white of hair, ruddy of face, had come to the Double Eight for supper this evening. He came regularly, once a week. Afterwards he had sat in the parlor, puffing noisily at his pipe and talking grimly with the Breynes.

So he was present, shortly before eleven, when the dusty stranger was brought into the parlor by a Double Eight cowhand. And he watched in wonder while old Cal Breyne, as tall and bony as a caricature of Uncle Sam, welcomed the newcomer in amazement.

"One of the Montana Breynes, eh?" Cal Breyne said slowly, eyes wide. "By thunder, I *did* have a cousin up there! Sid Breyne, his name was. I ain't heard from him in nigh on to thirty years. Didn't even know he *had* a son." Then suddenly Cal laughed and thrust out his bony hand. "But if you're Sid Breyne's boy, I'm right

proud to know you! Make yourself to home. Meet up with my boy, Slim, and my daughter, Edith."

His "boy" proved to be a man close to thirty, quite as tall and gaunt as Cal himself. There was something suggestive of a raw-boned, frontier Abraham Lincoln in both of them.

The girl, Edith, however, made Nick Breyne blink.

In her early twenties, she seemed to him as beautiful a creature as he had encountered anywhere in all his life. Her blue eyes glowed in a lovely young face. Her hair reminded him of wind-blown white wheat. She smiled warmly, the clasp of her hand as firm as a man's.

"Holy mackerel!" he thought.

When he had been introduced to the sheriff, the rancher asked him:

"What brings you to Texas?"

Nick Breyne shrugged. "Left Montana about a year ago with some notion of seein' what the rest of the West looked like. When I hit the Texas Panhandle I remembered how when my Pa was alive, he used to tell of a cousin he had down there. Pa's dead, you know; died twelve years back. So I figured I might as well drop around and look you up."

"I'm doggone glad you did," Cal declared heartily, surveying the lean figure with approval.

But his son, somewhat more saturnine, asked, "You aiming to stay a while?"

"I don't know," Nick admitted, settling on a chair. "Hadn't considered it much."

"Because if you are," Slim muttered surprisingly, "this Double Eight Ranch is just about as unhealthy a spot as you could pick. Mind, not that we wouldn't like to have you with us. God knows we'll need all the Breyne we can gather pretty soon. But on the other hand—"

"Slim!" The sharp ejaculation, on a note of warning and censure, broke from Edith. When her lanky brother stared at her, she said: "That's no way to welcome a visitor!"

"Well," Slim protested, "I was just

figuring to warn him."

"Reckon you don't have to tell me much," Nick put in drily, his voice low. "I stopped in Cinder Center on the way here. Picked up quite a bit of ornery gossip."

INSTANTLY Cal Breyne looked worried. "You—you mean they told you how we're suspected of changin' brands?"

"Yep." Nick was rolling a cigarette. "Speakin' for myself, I couldn't figure a Breyne doin' anything like that. It just ain't in the blood. Now that I've seen you, though, I could go back and tell those hombres they're loco. Besides, I've got further proof that—" He checked himself and peered narrowly at Cal Breyne. "Say, do you happen to have a big, red-haired waddy working for you?"

Bewildered, Breyne shook his head. "No-o, nobody like that. Why?"

"As I came through the badlands a while back I spotted a big, red-headed hombre changin' brands in a hollow. I went after him with my six-gun, but he got away."

The words, so quietly uttered, brought Sheriff Anderson out of his chair with an inarticulate cry. They made Cal Breyne and Slim gape, and Edith actually gasped.

"You saw *what*?" snapped the sheriff.

Nick Breyne lighted his cigarette. Tossing the match into the fireplace, he gave them a calm account of what had happened. By the time he finished Cal and Slim, as well as the sheriff, were reaching for sombreros. Cal Breyne nervously began buckling a holster about his bony hips. His lean face was grim, the mouth set in determined lines.

"Come along, Nick!" he said peremptorily. "Show us that hollow. Are them cows still there?"

"I left them there, yes. Left everything as I found it."

"Can you lead us back?"

"Don't see why not—that is, if you'll lend me a fresh horse. Mine is pretty much tuckered out." Then he

saw that Edith, too, was hurriedly putting on a sombrero. "Look here, ma'am," he protested, "you ain't going on this trip, are you?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"We might run into trouble. If we do—"

"I'm used to trouble!" she retorted.

So they all strode out to the corral and saddled horses. It was while he was tightening his latigo that Cal turned uncertainly to frown at the newcomer from Montana.

"Nick," he said tersely, "reckon it's only fair to warn you. If you'd rather not ride into this mess with us, I won't feel bad about it. Every time Slim and me ride into the hills these days we—we kind of feel we may be runnin' into a shower of lead. Folks around here is dead set against us. It wouldn't be fair to drag you into—"

"Forget it!" snapped Nick. "I'm a Breyne, ain't I? An' this begins to smell like a family job."

III

RIDING across the moonlit range toward the black masses of the badlands, Nick Breyne found himself between Edith and her father. Sheriff Anderson and Slim were loping some twenty yards ahead.

"Just what," Nick quietly asked the old cattleman, "do you figure to accomplish by going out for a looksee at those cows?"

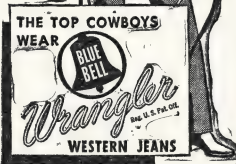
"It ain't the cows I'm interested in," the rancher snapped. "It's finding some sign around 'em to prove that it wasn't me or one of my men who changes the brands!"

They rode in silence for a full minute before Nick spoke. "How come everybody around Cinder Center has it in for you?" he asked. "I was talking to an hombre named Idaho Parson—"

"That's a buzzard who works for the Double Circle outfit," contemptuously interrupted Cal. "Idaho is top-hand for Jed Ravenor, who runs the

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Double Circle. *They've* got it in for me more than anybody else."

"Why?"

"The Double Circle is mighty big—one of the biggest spreads in this part of the state. Only thing wrong with it is it ain't got enough water for the number of cows it runs. There's a stream, but in midsummer it just about dries away. Me, my land lies between the Double Circle and the river. They figure if they could get my outfit they'd have all the water they need. What's more, my land grows just about as good grass as you can find in the Panhandle. They sure wouldn't mind buying it—that is, if they could get it at their own figure."

"I still don't see," repeated Nick Breyne, "what reason they got to call you a brand-blotter."

"No reason at all!" bitterly declared Cal.

But the girl put in with anger of her own, "Jed Ravenor has been trying to get Dad's land for years. He's made all kinds of offers, but we just laughed at them—they were so low. So Jed probably figured he could run us off our land. They've been rustling stock off other ranches—changing the brands, and running them on to *our* land, just so they could make us look guilty!"

Nick stared at the girl in amazement. "That's sure a high-handed way of doin' business."

"It's Jed Ravenor's way!"

"And the rest of Cinder Center believes him?"

"Oh," Cal Breyne put in bleakly, "you can't blame them too much. Suppose *your* cattle was found with changed brands on my outfit—what would *you* think?"

"Tonight," Nick recalled, "Idaho Parson told me to warn you that if another Double Circle cow with a changed brand was found on your spread, his crowd would come with guns smoking."

Cal Breyne nodded grimly but didn't speak.

"We've been expecting something like that for months," the girl whis-

pered, her face pale, her words tense. "If it happens, we're licked. We've got only four cowpunchers working for us—all out nighthawking now to see that nobody runs strange stock onto our land. If the cattlemen around Cinder Center joined up to blast us out of the country, we couldn't do much."

THEY LOPED over a low ridge.

As they descended the far slope Nick Breyne scowled at the badlands looming ahead. "How come," he asked, "you folks never put in a complaint with the Cattlemen's Association?"

"Wasn't much use," Cal rapped out. "The others got there ahead of me. The Cattlemen's Association said as how they'd send an investigator. Reckon he'll be along in a week or two. Meanwhile—well, meanwhile, we just been sittin' tight!" He peered sharply at Nick. "Seems like you might help us, though, to convince folks *we* ain't been changin' brands."

"By testifying I saw this red-headed hombre doing it, eh?"

"Could you describe him pretty clear?"

Apparently Sheriff Anderson had heard the query, for he threw back over his shoulder, "Even if he could, Cal, I don't think it would do much good. For one thing, this man is a Breyne and certain folks would say that anything a Breyne testified was invented just to shield you. What's more, he had no witnesses. It would be his word against the red-headed hombre's. You can't get far that way."

Nick considered before he inquired of Cal, "Know anybody who might fit the description of that red-headed hombre?"

"If he was as big as you say, he might be Bighead Cortilla. He's the only one I know who fits those specifications."

"Who's Bighead Cortilla?"

"A no-good polecat that hangs around Cinder Center. Gambles when he has the money. Does almost anything else when he's broke."

That brought a queer smile to Nick Breyne's lips.

"He sure sounds like the kind of varmint who'd stoop to changin' brands," he whispered.

There were plenty of landmarks Nick Breyne had noticed on his way out of the badlands. They served now to lead him in a fairly direct line to the hollow in which he had witnessed the changing of brands. But when at last he reached its rim, far below them, in the bottom of the saucer where the Double Circle cows still huddled, there was a crowd of some twenty men.

"By golly," whispered Sheriff Anderson, "they found the critters before we did!" He looked back uneasily. "Looks like trouble, Cal."

The cattleman's face was gaunt, yet there was no fear in his expression. His eyes burned, and his jaws became rugged.

Sheriff Anderson appeared profoundly worried. "Cal," he said after a pause, his frown fastened on the crowd below, "you know I'm for you. But it seems like somebody who knew about the brand-blottin' must have led that crowd into the badlands tonight. They probably figure they scared away the hombre who was usin' that iron. I'm willin' to bet that within the next couple minutes they'll start headin' for your outfit."

The sheriff's prediction kept those on the rim of the hollow silent and strained. Nick could feel the abnormal pounding of his own heart.

"Maybe I could stop them," he said tautly, "if I rode down there and told them about the redhead. We'd give them something to think about, anyway."

Anderson lifted an uncertain hand to the white hair that curled out from under the brim of his sombrero. For a moment he pondered, then reached an abrupt decision.

"Cal," he snapped, turning in the saddle, "you, Edith, and Slim stay up here—out of sight, or ride back to your outfit. If you show up down there you're apt to start a riot. I aim

to take your cousin along with me."

"What for?"

"They got nothing against Nick Breyne, seein' as how he's just come into the country. There are a few things I hanker to know." The sheriff squinted at Nick. "Willing to come?"

"Sure thing."

"I'm warnin' you, though, it may lead to a fight. I see Jed Ravenor among 'em. Idaho Parson, too."

"I'll take my chances," said Nick.

CURIOSLY, he was aware of Edith Breyne's worried stare fastened on him. He glanced at her. She looked frightened, her lovely young face pallid.

"I don't know," she began. "It doesn't seem fair to drag you into this. It's our fight, not yours."

"Forget it," Nick Breyne laughed. "Don't worry about me, Miss Edith. I got the sheriff on my side, haven't I?"

And so, a moment later, he accompanied Sheriff Anderson down the long, graveled slope into the hollow. By that time the crowd at the bottom were mounting horses. There was something grim and resolute in the very sounds that rose from the men. But they checked their arguments abruptly and gaped up in astonishment when Anderson shouted.

In silence the twenty men awaited the official and the stranger who rode beside him. Anderson called:

"What's up, boys?"

A heavy-set man whose clothes, like his sombrero, were black, rode out of the crowd on a fine white horse.

"Sheriff," he said sharply, "you've come just at about the right time! There's been more brand-blottin'—right here!"

"That's Jed Ravenor," Anderson whispered from a corner of his mouth. Aloud he said with a tinge of anger, "Who's been changin' brands?"

"Who do you think?" contemptuously. "Old man Breyne!"

"Breyne?" in surprise. "Did you see him?"

"I didn't, but Bighead Cortilla did."

Nick arched his brows at that. He looked in wonder at the sheriff, then let a mirthless smile tug at his determined lips.

"Things sure are beginning to fit together!" he muttered.

Sheriff Anderson said nothing else until he reached the group below. Several men, recognizing Nick Breyne as a result of his visit to the Cinder Center saloon, greeted him with unpleasant scowls. But Nick appeared to notice nothing. He sat easily in his saddle, imperturbable and silent.

"Let me get this straight, Jed," said Sheriff Anderson. "Where's Bighead Cortilla?"

"In town—with a bullet-hole in his thigh."

"Eh?"

JED RAVENOR, sturdy and dark-complected, spoke with a great deal of anger. "Sheriff, I've stood for just about all I intend to stand for! We were all over at the saloon, some of us playing poker, when Bighead Cortilla rode in with his report."

"What report?"

"Bighead swears as how he was comin' through the badlands here, bound for Cinder Center, when he looked down into this hollow. He spotted Cal Breyne squattin' over a fire and changin' brands on half a dozen cows. Bighead pulled his gun and started down into the hollow, yelling. He figured to grab Cal and drag him into town. But Cal pulled iron. Blazed away and nicked Bighead in the leg."

"When Bighead kept ridin' closer, Cal hopped into his saddle and rode out of the hollow. Left the cows just the way you see 'em. And have a look, Sheriff—they're all my stock, all Double Circle!"

Anderson, apparently bewildered, sent a quick look at Nick Breyne. Then he cleared his throat with a loud, rattling sound. When he spoke again his voice was firm.

"Jed," he said, "somebody's been lyin'."

"What do you mean?"

Anderson nodded to Nick Breyne. "This here gent is a stranger hereabouts. Tonight he came across badlands, tryin' to find a short cut to the Double Eight Ranch. The way I got the story he caught Bighead Cortilla changin' brands. And it was Bighead who skedaddled after firin' a few slugs by way of *adios*. According to what you say, either this gent or Bighead got the story twisted."

The crowd in the hollow was hushed now. Some of the men looked startled, some perplexed. But Jed Ravenor, with the bald figure of Idaho Parson a few feet behind him, swung stormy eyes to Nick Breyne. He studied the stranger for several seconds. Then he said quietly:

"I don't know you, hombre. I don't know what reason you got to butt into this business—or how you came to stumble on this hollow. This sure ain't no short-cut to the Double Eight Ranch from Cinder Center. All I got to say is I believe Bighead Cortilla. If you're tryin' to shift the blame on

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him, why I'm sayin' right out loud that you're a liar."

Only a couple of feet separated Nick and Jed Ravenor. As the black-clad rancher flung out his words, something happened so swiftly so unexpectedly, that it wrenched gasps from a dozen men.

Nick drove out his fists. He swung without warning, and hard. A curious little sound, almost a squeal, exploded from Ravenor, and he lurched out of the saddle to crash heavily on the ground.

"I ain't accustomed," said Nick Breyne, "to bein' called a liar by any man."

IV

WHEN RAVENOR hit the ground, his senses were momentarily jarred. But his brain cleared quickly as he lifted his head. An oath burst from him, and he grasped his six-gun. He might have lifted it and fired straight at Nick Breyne.

But Sheriff Anderson, despite his age, was already out of his saddle. When Ravenor seized his weapon, the sheriff instantly stepped on the cattleman's wrist.

"None of that, Jed!"

"Damn him!" yelled Ravenor, his voice hoarse. "If he thinks he can get away with—"

"You called him a liar."

"He said—"

"Calling a man a liar generally results in a fight, Jed. You ought to know that. Stow your gun."

"Doggone it, Sheriff!"

"Put your gun away! We'll talk later!"

The sternness of Anderson's voice could not be ignored. Perhaps Ravenor, despite his loss of temper, realized that Anderson commanded the respect of every man in the crowd. He had served Cinder Center as sheriff for almost twenty-three years, and his words would be backed. A curious, almost menacing quality in the silence of the men warned Ravenor that he had better obey.

So, grunting, he thrust the six-gun back into the holster and scrambled to his feet. As he brushed dust from his clothes he glowered up at Nick Breyne.

"Hombre," he said savagely, "I ain't forgetting this!"

"Any time you got a hankerin' to try it, Ravenor—"

"Stop it!" Sheriff Anderson's voice cracked down between them like an ax. "You two can settle your private grudge some other time, I'm interested in findin' out who used that runnin' iron tonight. According to Big-head Cortilla, it was Cal Breyne. Well, I happen to know, Jed, that it *couldn't* have been Cal."

"Why not?"

"I had supper at the Double Eight tonight. I've been with Cal, sittin' in the same room with him, since six o'clock. He was never out of my sight."

That caused Jed Ravenor's mouth to fall open. It evoked murmurs of surprise and uneasiness from other men. Nobody doubted Sheriff Anderson. Even Ravenor couldn't challenge the official's statement.

"But what the devil—" Ravenor stammered. "I'm tellin' you what Big-head Cortilla said to us." He hesitated, then rushed on, "Maybe Big-head made a mistake in the darkness. Cal and his son Slim look pretty much alike, if you meet up with them at night. From a distance, I mean, where you can't tell the difference in age. Maybe it was Slim—"

"Slim Breyne," sternly snapped the sheriff, "was at supper with us, too. The only time he went out of the house was when he walked over to the barn for a spell. I don't think he was out of my sight more than twenty minutes, at most. Certainly not long enough to come over here, rustle and brand Double Circle stock." Anderson shook his white head and turned back to his horse. "Gents," he demanded, "where did you leave Bighead?"

"In Cinder Center," mumbled Idaho Parson, frowning uneasily. "He went over to Doc Klugh's house to have

his leg bandaged."

"That being the case," declared Sheriff Anderson, "I'm headin' for town. I aim to palaver with Bighead Cortilla myself."

NOBODY could object to that.

Breyne noticed that a quick and somewhat unnerved glance passed between Jed Ravenor and his tophand, Idaho Parson, yet neither man spoke. In silence, that was touched with sullenness, they got into their saddles and followed the crowd.

From the corners of his eyes Nick Breyne sent a searching glance toward the boulders where he had left Cal, Slim, and Edith. He could see nothing of them. Probably they were still concealed in black shadows. It was better, he mused, to keep them out of this for the present.

Nick Breyne drew a long breath.

"A meetin' with this Bighead hombre," he mused as he rode beside Anderson, "ought to produce some interestin' fireworks!"

Half an hour later pudgy little Doctor Klugh, wearing only a pair of pants over his underclothes, blinked out of his door at the crowd that had roused him from sleep.

"Bighead Cortilla?" he repeated, dazed. "Why—why, sure. He was here, but that was some time ago."

"Was he able to walk when he left?" asked the sheriff.

"Oh, he could walk, all right. The gash in his leg wasn't bad. Last I saw of him he was climbing into his saddle. I thought he'd probably go for a drink to kind of steady his nerves."

The crowd left Doctor Klugh's house and returned at once to Cinder Center's saloon. The place was almost deserted now, and Bighead Cortilla wasn't in sight.

When Anderson questioned the bartender, the man shook his head in perplexity. "Why, no, Sheriff," he muttered. "Bighead wasn't in here at all tonight."

Some of the men went to the bar to slake their thirst. Nick Breyne, standing near the door, didn't join

them. From the corners of his eyes he saw a familiar figure playing solitaire in the rear of the saloon. It was Rufe Gunnison, who had directed him to take the short cut across the badlands.

Gunnison stubbornly refused to meet Nick's eyes. So, while the crowd, including Sheriff Anderson, made plans at the bar to continue the search for Bighead Cortilla, Nick Breyne stepped out of the saloon. He walked around the side of the dark building until he reached a rear window. It was open, and through it he could see Rufe hardly five feet away.

"Gunnison!" he whispered.

The man playing solitaire violently started. In an instant he sat rigid. Then, turning his head only a couple of inches, he spoke low words over his shoulder:

"Don't talk to me where they can watch!"

"Come out here."

"It ain't safe."

"I've got to palaver with you. Come out or I come in."

RUFE GUNNISON hesitated, his wiry body stiff. Then, as though reaching a decision, he tossed the cards away and pretended to stifle a long yawn behind his hand. He rose without the slightest trace of hurry and moved toward the saloon's exit. On the way he paused to talk to one or two men.

Presently Nick Breyne, waiting in darkness behind the saloon, was gratified to see the little figure shuffle up to him, anxiously.

"What is it?"

"Gunnison, you sent me across those badlands on purpose tonight," Nick began. "You figured I might see Bighead Cortilla on the way, didn't you?"

Rufe gulped hard and fidgeted. He looked back over his shoulder as if to assure himself that nobody could be hearing them.

"Listen—" he started then checked himself.

Nick smiled down encouragingly

into the small man's countenance. "You needn't be scared of me, Gunnison," he said. "I sure appreciate what you did, but I don't seem to *sabe* why you did it."

Gunnison still hesitated, his hand nervously rubbing at his thigh. But suddenly he looked up with new candor.

"I'll tell you the truth," he whispered. "When I heard you were a Breyne I figured you'd be on Cal Breyne's side, and he sure needs plenty help! I happen to know that Jed Ravenor's been tryin' to run him out of the country. But if anybody on the Double Circle knew it was me who sent you across the badlands tonight—well, I'd be buzzard bait by sunup. So, keep my name out of this mess, will you?"

"How did you know I'd run up against Bighead in the badlands?"

Rufe Gunnison brushed a nervous hand across his lips. Again he turned to assure himself nobody could be listening.

"It's like this," he began. "For the past few months, ever since I was hurt, I ain't been workin'. Been hangin' around Cinder Center mostly. So has Bighead Cortilla. He was never one to hold a steady job. Naturally, we was thrown together plenty. Bighead ain't got a home. Me, I got me a shack up in the hills. So I'd take him along and let him sleep there a couple of times a week. Last night Bighead got plenty drunk, and he was kind of droolin' as we sat there, out by my shack. He got friendly."

Rufe Gunnison shuddered slightly, as if the very memory of Bighead Cortilla was repulsive. Nick Breyne listened carefully as the smaller man went on.

"Bighead said as how he liked me and he'd give me a chance to make some real easy money with him. Wanted me to help him rustle Double Circle cows one of these nights and change their brands to Double Eight. That sure got me. Seems that up to now Ravenor and Idaho Parson had been doing the blotting them-

selves. But they figured it was too dangerous. So they offered Bighead five dollars a head if he'd run cows off their own spread and change the brands to Double Eight."

New excitement had been rising in Gunnison's voice. He leaned forward, seized Nick Breyne's wrist.

"I didn't throw in with Bighead, but I decided to watch him. I'm mighty fond of Cal Breyne, so I figured I could clear his reputation easy. So I kept watchin' Bighead, wonderin' what night he'd go out to get those cows. He came into town with me this evenin'. I went into some stores to buy grub. By the time I got out, he'd disappeared. I figured he didn't even remember the things he babbled to me while he was drunk last night."

GUNNISON looked behind him, then continued:

"Well, he'd told me he'd be changin' brands up there in the hollow in the badlands one o' these nights. So I went over to find Sheriff Anderson and pass along the word. But the sheriff wasn't anywhere around. I was just figurin' to ride over to the Double Eight Ranch and tell Cal, when *you* drifted into town. So, I sent you across the badlands, figurin' that if Bighead was there you might spot his brandin' fire."

"Tell me this," snapped Nick Breyne. "Do you think Bighead is over to your shack now?"

"No."

"How come you're so sure?"

"He'd probably figure that the crowd would hunt him there, so that they could ask some questions."

"And you think he didn't want to be questioned tonight, huh?"

"I'm doggone sure of it!"

The men were beginning to pour out of the saloon. Nick Breyne watched them climb into their saddles. He heard somebody shout, "Gunnison's shack is up there, on the side o' the mountain!" And he realized that Rufe was right—the crowd was going to the obvious place to seek Bighead. ✓

A slow smile crawled across his mouth, but it wasn't a humorous smile. He tapped Rufe Gunnison's shoulder.

"Thanks," he whispered. "I'll let that mob go on without me, I reckon."

"What're you goin' to do?"

"I aim to hunt Bighead by myself and in my own way."

"Do you know where he went?" Gunnison asked in surprise.

"I got a hunch and I'm goin' to play it for all it's worth."

"Why don't you tell the sheriff? Why don't you tell some of those other hombres? Take them along with you."

Nick Breyne shook his head. "I figure," he said as he moved away from Gunnison, "maybe I can make Bighead talk more freely if he and me are alone for a spell."

Gunnison turned to Nick Breyne. "Remember it's like I said before. If the news ever got out that I'd butted into this business, I wouldn't last two hours. And I kind o' hanker to go on living a while."

V

GUNNISON remained behind the saloon while Nick Breyne, hitching up his gun-belt, walked back to the road. Sheriff Anderson, seeing him immediately led his horse toward Nick.

"Comin' along," he snapped tersely. "The crowd's going up to Rufe Gunnison's shack, I hanker to question that man. If you want to come—"

Nick Breyne shook his head. "Leave me out of it, Sheriff." He peered about swiftly. The crowd at the hitching rack was some twenty feet away. "You lead those hombres over to Rufe Gunnison's cabin," he said softly. "Most of them are Double Circle men, aren't they?"

"That's right." Anderson was visibly perplexed. "What about you?"

"I got a hunch, Sheriff, that Bighead rode over to the Double Circle!"

At that Anderson arched his brows. "Any particular reason for thinking so?"

"Just this: I'm bankin' on the fact that Bighead was working for Jed Ravenor of the Double Circle. I plugged him tonight, and he was hurt. What's more, he didn't want to be questioned too close. Now, when a man's hurt and wants to stay out of the way, where would he go to hunt shelter? I'd say, offhand, he'd go to the hombre for whom he's working, who's paying him to keep his mouth shut."

Sheriff Anderson appeared to be fighting inner excitement. He sent a quick glance at the men who were already in saddles. Before he could speak, however, Nick went on:

"No use leading that whole crowd over to the Double Circle. Out of those twenty men there must be fifteen who ride for Jed Ravenor. They'd deny from here to hell that Bighead was on their spread. They'd probably keep him hid from you. Sheriff, the best thing you can do is hold those hombres out of the way. If I locate Bighead, I'll drag him out, and bring him to you before morning."

Anderson was being impatiently called by the mounted men, but he ignored the cries long enough to peer curiously into the depths of Nick Breyne's eyes. "How come you're going to all this trouble?" he whispered.

Nick grinned and shrugged. "I'm a Breyne."

A few minutes later Nick Breyne watched Sheriff Anderson lead the crowd out of Cinder Center. They pounded away through the night in the direction of Gunnison's shack on the mountainside. And when they were gone, when the town was again silent, Nick climbed into his own saddle. At the corner of the saloon he spied the anxious face of Rufe Gunnison.

"Just one thing more you can tell me, Gunnison," he said. "How do I reach the Double Circle?"

Though startled by the question, Gunnison gave clear instructions. A moment later Nick Breyne galloped

off alone—in the direction opposite to that Sheriff Anderson had taken.

Half a mile from Cinder Center, as he rounded the foot of a bluff, Nick almost collided with the owners of the Double Eight Ranch.

Apprehensive, hardly knowing what was wisest for them to do, Cal Breyne, Slim, and Edith had trailed the crowd toward town.

"But like the sheriff said," Cal uneasily explained, "we figured our showing up might kind of—well, incite those hombres. So we didn't come all the way."

"How come you left the others?" Slim put in quickly. "Where you heading?"

An instant Nick hesitated. Somehow his eyes sought those of the girl. In her eyes he found a mute question that evoked frankness. And so he told them of his plan.

"We're goin' with you!" Cal declared.

"No," snapped Nick. "That won't be necessary."

"If you think we're goin' to let you fight out battles single-handed, you're loco," put in Slim Breyne. "This is our fight. It's doggone white of you to take a hand, but we can't let you do it alone. If you're headin' for the Double Circle, I'm ridin' with you!"

"And me," firmly declared Cal. He turned to his daughter. "Edith ride for home"

A PROTEST rose to the girl's lips, again she sought Nick's gaze. He nodded gently, and a little smile came to his lips.

"I don't figure there'll be much gunplay, Miss Edith," he said quietly. "But it may handicap us, at that, to have a woman around. We'll be along in an hour or two."

So it was that when he proceeded toward the Double Circle, Cal and Slim rode with him.

They rode through moonlight in silence. When they reached the ranch-house of the Double Circle, the place was dark. Even the bunkhouse showed

no light. Apparently all those who hadn't gone night-hawking had ridden into Cinder Center with Jed Ravenor and Idaho Parson.

The Breyne's dismounted grimly. They tossed their reins over posts of the corral fence.

"How you figure to find him?" muttered Slim, scowling. "Hunt through the house?"

Nick nodded. An instant he stood frowning uncertainly at the white building. Of its own accord, his right hand tested the six-gun in his holster.

"Come on," he muttered. "Keep on your toes, gents."

The screen-door of the house was unlocked. Three figures moved forward into the darkness. Their only source of illumination was the moonlight that poured through windows.

They climbed the steps in single file, each man steadying himself with a hand on the banister as silent as Indians on the hunt. Once, when a floor-board creaked, the three of them halted and held their breaths.

Apparently, however, there was nobody in the house to interfere with them. So they proceeded up the stairs.

There were several bedrooms on the upper floor. The doors were open. Moving from one to another, they peered into chamber after chamber without result. Suddenly Slim, who had gone to the farthest door in the hall, caught his breath, waved a quick hand.

Nick and Cal at once hurried to his side. When they looked into the open door both men promptly drew revolvers.

A huge red-haired figure lay, face down, on the bed. He hadn't troubled to undress, save to take off his dungarees. His right thigh was bound by a tight bandage.

"That's Bighead!" whispered Cal.

The man was asleep, but he didn't remain asleep; for Bighead Cortilla was roused by a sharp prod in his back. When he blinked his eyes open and turned and sat up with a start,

he suddenly recoiled against the wall.

"What in thunder—" he gasped.

Bighead found himself staring into the bores of three six-guns. He gaped. A shiver of terror racked his whole huge figure.

"Howdy, Bighead," said Nick Breyne. "Remember me?"

"N-no!"

"You sure got a poor memory, ain't you? I'm the hombre who swapped slugs with you in the hollow tonight—while you were changing brands on Double Circle stock."

THEY COULD hear the wild catch of Bighead Cortilla's breath. His eyes widened. He looked from face to face with increasing horror. His eyes dropped to the menacing guns.

"What do you want?" he blurted.

"We figured," Nick Breyne went on in that same low voice, "that this community could get on fine without gents who make a livin' out of changin' brands. So we came to take you out, Bighead, and put a couple of slugs into your carcass."

"No!" The man's voice was stifled. "For the love of heaven, you can't do that!"

"Get up on your feet, Bighead!"

"I'm wounded!"

"You wasn't wounded too bad to come to the Double Circle. Get up! Or would you rather get a slug between the eyes right here?"

Nick Breyne's gun moved forward a couple of inches. The gesture brought Bighead all but leaping off his bed. He stood among those three men like a great, terrified hound.

"You can't shoot a man like this!" he quavered. "It's plain murder!"

"Can't we?" Savage mockery lurked in the depths of old Cal Breyne's voice.

Slim stepped behind the big man. He gave him a shove that sent Bighead stumbling crazily across the room. With three guns aimed at his back he was compelled to precede the Breyne's down the dark stairs.

"There's just one thing that could

persuade me not to kill you," Nick said softly.

At that Bighead gaped up at him over his shoulder. "What's that?"

"You were workin' for Jed Ravenor when you changed those brands, weren't you?"

"Who told you that?"

"Never mind who told me. It's the truth. Just between you an' me, Bighead, I'm a lot more interested in putting guilt where it belongs than in making buzzard meat of you." They were at the bottom of the stairs now and they halted. Nick nodded toward a door which gave upon Jed Ravenor's office.

"Reckon there's paper and pencil in there. Bighead, if you was to write out a confession telling exactly how Jed Ravenor hired you to change those brands on his own cattle and drive the stock over on Double Eight range, I'd be inclined to let you live."

Bighead Cortilla stared at him. Then the man leaned against the wall and laughed—a gust of laughter that held no trace of mirth. "Smart, ain't you?" he said harshly.

"Kind of. Why?"

"I got no particular love for Jed Ravenor," said Bighead. "I worked for him only because he was paying. But if I wrote out a thing like you say, Jed's boys would get me before morning!"

"No, they wouldn't. You'll be in jail."

"Jail?" Bighead was startled.

"Yep. Instead of shooting you we'll turn you over to Sheriff Anderson. He'll see that Ravenor don't get at you."

"No!" I won't do it!"

"Suit yourself." Again Bighead sustained a shove, this time from Nick. As he staggered toward the front door, Cal growled:

"No use disturbin' anybody who may be asleep. We'll ride him off half a mile and plug him near the badlands."

Cal sounded so earnest that there was no doubting his intentions. Big-

head, staring at those three Breyne faces suddenly realized that they symbolized doom. He paused at the door, looked from gun to gun, then he sent a wildly uncertain glance at the door of the office.

"Get going!" snapped Nick.

And then, unexpectedly, Bighead's resistance collapsed. In hoarse tones he gasped, "Look here! If I do write out a paper like that, how do I know you won't shoot me anyway?"

"You'll have to take our word for it."

"But—"

"I don't figure to stand around arguing," flatly said Nick Breyne. "Either you walk into that office and write, or you walk out of that door and take a backful of slugs. Which do you prefer?"

Bighead hesitated only five seconds. "I'll write!"

VI

TEN MINUTES later, when they compelled Bighead Cortilla to straddle a mustang and ride with them in the direction of Cinder Center, Cal Breyne was in the possession of a paper that caused his heart to sing. He rode with a joyous glow in his eyes—a glow which was reflected in the features of his son. For that paper, written and signed by Bighead Cortilla, was sufficient to exonerate the Breyne from all suspicion.

Moreover, it was sufficient to insure the arrest of Jed Ravenor and the end of trouble on the range. The party rode with no particular hurry—but they never reached Cinder Center with their prisoner.

They were still a mile from town when, rounding a bend in the trail that brought them around a wall of bluffs, they abruptly drew rein. Ahead of them, coming from Cinder Center was the entire crowd that had been searching for Bighead.

In the moonlight Nick recognized the white-haired figure of Sheriff Anderson. He recognized Jed Ravenor, too, and Idaho Parson, and others.

From the crowd ahead burst a chorus of wild, startled yells. Simultaneously, they must all have touched rowels to their horses, because the whole calvacade came thundering toward the bluffs.

"Let me do the talking, will you?"

Nick said quickly.

"You're plumb welcome to it!" answered Cal. "Me, I don't aim to do any talkin' at all. I'll let this paper speak for me!" And he patted the document in his shirt pocket.

The crowd rode up in a billow of choking dust. As they stopped, horses reared, and a dozen voices shouted hoarse questions about Bighead.

Nick Breyne interrupted the hubbub by lifting his arm. When the hush was complete, he faced the mounted sheriff.

"You'll be interested in that document, Sheriff," he said tersely. "I had a hunch a while back that if Bighead Cortilla was working for Jed Ravenor, we might find him at the Double Circle. The hunch worked out fine. We found him there, all right. And we persuaded Bighead to write out that bit of news Cal is holding."

He saw, while he spoke, that the terror in Bighead Cortilla's countenance was being mirrored in the features of Jed Ravenor. And Idaho Parson was beginning to look scared too. Somehow Nick had an impulse to grin, but he suppressed it.

"Sheriff, before I go into the contents of that paper, it seems to me there's something I ought to explain for the benefit of everybody here. A few weeks ago some local ranchers wrote the Cattlemen's Association, asking for an investigator to come down and find out who was changin' brands. The Association picked me.

"According to the letters of complaint that came, everybody was accusin' a gent named Cal Breyne of rustling stock and blotting brands for his own benefit. It seems what most of these local folks wanted the Association to do was get proof that Breyne was the guilty hombre.

"The Association looked into the facts concerning this man Cal Breyne. One of the things we discovered was that he had relatives up in Montana. That gave me an idea. I figured if I could come down here and pass myself off as one of the Montana Breyne I might land me a job on the Double Eight spread. Mebbe, I'd be welcomed as a kinsman. That, it seemed to me, was the best way of getting an inside track on things.

"So," he smiled at the astounded Cal, "I might as well begin by confessing. My name ain't Nick Breyne. It's Tip Warren. I was hoping to get a job on your outfit, Cal. But things happened so fast since I reached this part of the world that I never got a chance even to ask for it."

He couldn't repress a dry chuckle. The silence about him was tense now. The fact that he had revealed himself as an impartial representative of the Cattlemen's Association lent new weight to every word he uttered. He nodded toward Bighead Cortilla.

"Let me tell you about him, Sheriff. Cortilla swears that he was to get five dollars a head for every brand he changed. Jed Ravenor hired him for the job. In justice to the other hombres who are working for Jed, I want to tell you that none of them was aware of what their boss was doing—that is, none except Idaho Parson. Everything I'm telling you is backed by Bighead's confession. Sheriff, I'm calling on you to—"

That was as far as he could go. At that instant something must have snapped in Jed Ravenor's brain.

Maybe he went crazy with fear, with rage. Or maybe his was the type of mind that could not endure defeat. Whatever the reason, Jed Ravenor suddenly drew his six-gun. Before anyone could reach him he fired.

That first shot of his must have been prompted by hatred for the man who had betrayed him. His slug crashed squarely into the chest of Bighead Cortilla and Bighead fell backward out of his saddle.

Men yelled. Somebody screamed. "Stop him!" But Jed Ravenor fired again, this time at the man who had called himself Nick Breyne.

But Tip Warren dodged. He'd had ample warning of what to expect. He heard the whine of the bullet over his head.

FROM THE corners of his eyes Tip Warren saw that Sheriff Anderson had flung himself at Idaho Parson. For Idaho, too, had drawn his gun. The sheriff was too busy at the moment to face Ravenor.

There was only one thing to do, and Tip Warren did it. As he dodged, he drew his gun. He fired twice—and on his second shot Jed Ravenor toppled from his horse to fall on the trail.

There was a great deal of confusion and shouts and indignation. But when it was all over, the bodies of Jed Ravenor and Bighead Cortilla were being hurried toward Cinder Center. And Idaho Parson, disarmed, was the sheriff's prisoner.

Curiously, however, most of the men rode around the stranger who had called himself Nick Breyne. They were throwing a thousand questions at him, which he answered.

But his thoughts, by some strange quirk, were no longer on the confusion about him. They had darted on toward the Double Eight Ranch—on toward the loveliest girl he had seen in Texas. Suddenly he looked at Cal Breyne, who was still astounded. And he grinned.

"Cal," he said quietly, "we'll be through with this mess in a little while. Why don't you invite me to come and spend the night at the Double Eight? I—I'd like that."

"Hombre," declared Cal with a rush of enthusiasm, "you're welcome to my home and anything else I got!"

"I figure to remember that promise," chuckled Tip Warren, his thoughts still on the girl.

A Novel by
LARRY A. HARRIS

I

JUST AT dark, Rance Morton pulled in his double span of mules on a high roll. The lurching, creaking, covered wagon came to a halt. Building a smoke, Morton

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SOUTHWEST PASSAGE

The tortuous trail, infested with badmen, lies ahead — a trail

Rance Morton must follow to meet his brother's slayer

Heartened by a Girl's Faith, a Courageous

studied the night-gloomed expanse of brushy wasteland stretching out below. It was like an endless black sea, sinister, uninviting. Far off to the north the Fra Cristobals towered up out of the shadows like black monuments to those who had died attempting to reach their haven of security.

Like others who had braved this hellish stretch, Rance Morton felt awed by the grandeur of the distant mountains, felt a tingle of chill at the threat of danger presented. Back of him lay the Rio Grande and verdant Mesilla Valley. Ahead lay ninety miles of sand-swept, waterless desert. A fierce, raw, untamed land through which the Spanish *conquistadores* had trailed two centuries ago.

Holy men of the brown cloth who had built missions were gone now, their missions crumbling. But this desolate trail they had cut through the mesquite was here, flanked by lonely unmarked graves.

"*Jornada del Muerte*," Morton murmured grimly. "Trail of Death. Get along, mulies. We'll make it."

It was sweltering hot. The four mules strained against the tugs. The wagon lurched down the slope. Water in the barrels strapped to the sides of the wagon sloshed over.

A MILE ahead, Morton spotted his small bedded herd. One-eyed Sully Northrup, who had been riding point, had called a halt in a clearing.

The beckoning light of a small campfire sprang up out of the darkness down there, Morton discerned the familiar figure of his young brother, near the fire preparing supper. And Morton thrilled to the courage of his brother "Tag" and Sully Northrup.

Three days ago when Morton had told them he was pulling stakes, heading north for a new start, neither of them could have been held back with a span of oxen. Yet both knew the dangers they were facing. Even Tag, only a freckled-faced kid of sixteen.

As Morton tooled the lumbering wagon nearer the fire he spied his brother riding to overtake him. The kid's levis were gray with dust, his face pale with fatigue. But he could still grin. Across the swell of his saddle he clutched his long-barreled rifle. He wheeled in beside the wagon, rode back toward the herd where Sully Northrup was waiting.

"Old Rance the water boy!" Tag whooped, laughing. "And you was the one that told me to watch out for McDowell and his cutthroats! Shucks, Rance, McDowell wouldn't ride out here for our small pickin's." He snorted. "Fifty head of white-faces and a wagon-load of belongin's."

Rance grinned at the kid. "Just pays to be careful, Tag. Two more days of this heat and then the pine country."

Two more days—then somewhere in a fertile valley this side of Santa Fe, they would homestead. It was all a wonderful adventure, especially to Tag Morton.

As Morton leaped down from the wagon Sully Northrup limped up, helped him unspan the teams while Tag unloaded the grub and blankets.

"I'm hungry as a holed-up bear, Rance," he grumbled good-naturedly. "Let's eat and get the fire stomped out. Too hot for a fire. I'll take the first hitch at nighthawkin'."

Old Sully Northrup's one good eye avoided Morton. There was a strange uneasiness about Sully that he was failing to conceal. It only served to stir deeper in Morton the uncanny feeling he had felt himself since the coming of darkness.

But Rance said nothing until he and Sully were alone, hobbling the mules beyond the circle of firelight.

"You cut any danger sign today, Sully?" Morton asked softly.

In the darkness, Sully looked up at Morton.

"Nary a sign, son."

Morton knew when this oldster was lying. And he knew now that Sully

Cattleman Heads for a Deadly Gun Showdown

was holding something from him.

"What'd you find, Sully?" Morton asked grimly.

Sully looked about uneasily into the gloom, fingering the handle of his bowie. "Might as well tell you, Rance. Didn't want to scare the kid because I might of been wrong. But about an hour ago I skylined a rider."

"A white man?"



RANCE MORTON

"A white man," said Sully. "Let the kid get some shut-eye instead of goin' out nighthawkin'. But you and me, Rance, we'd best keep our eyes peeled."

Morton nodded grimly. Without another word they strode back to the campfire where Tag was singing as he cooked supper. Sully pitched in to help the boys.

Tall, wide-shouldered Rance Morton hunkered down, watched the other two prepare the food. In the firelight his blue-gray eyes were narrow with thought, shadowed by the brim of his flat-crowned hat. His tanned face was hard.

"Rance, you look like you was settin' on some cactus."

Morton started, forcing a grin. He

had hardly been aware that Tag was talking.

"Just hungry, kid," he said quietly.

When the hot steak, boiled potatoes and warmed-over frijoles were ready, Rance and Tag ate in silence for the most part. Sully, a wiry little oldster, did most of the talking.

Where Sully Northrup's right eye should have been was only a healed-over scar, the memento of an Indian arrow. The old fellow wore a fringed buckskin suit and a coonskin hat. He habitually growled and swore, and always had a small jug of whisky strapped to his saddle-horn.

But faults and all, Rance Morton liked the old buffalo hunter and wagon train guide. He knew he could trust Sully. One night in a saloon brawl, Morton had saved the old hellion's life. Since then, Sully Northrup had trailed Rance Morton everywhere Rance went.

"Now speakin' of Injuns and renegades, Tag," he was saying now. "By gunnie, I've saw 'em, I have. I fit the Tonkawas and the Lipans 'fore Texas was ever a republic. I whittled Mexes with me old bowie here, whuppin' 'em at their own game." He paused, took a long swig from his half-gallon jug, and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "And by gunnie, son, if it warn't for this likker I'd be gov'nor some day!"

HE TALKED on, eyes dropping to the rifle at his side. He avoided looking at Rance across the fire from him. Tag, stretched out on the ground near him, lay full fed and content, listening, as a kid will.

But even as Sully talked, Rance Morton stiffened to a new sound. Through the low moan of the bedded herd off in the darkness came a rumbling sound. Abruptly Sully quit talking, his gaze leaping to Rance. The kid sat up, eyes thinning. With the lithe quick movements of a panther, Rance came to his feet, made a dash for his rifle against the wagon wheel.

"Rance!" shrilled Tag. "Them's riders—comin' this way!"

"By gunnie, boys! *It's McDowell!*"

As if Sully Northrup's warning shout had been the signal for attack, it came! Blasting rifles ripped wide the night. Thundering riders loomed up out of the darkness, firing, yelling, charging straight toward the fire. Off in the inky gloom the herd was stampeding.

Stunned by the suddenness of the attack, Rance Morton whirled, crouched, the Walker six-guns at his sides sweeping up into his hands, spewing death at the hulking figures bearing down on him. He saw Sully on his knees, triggering his rifle, his cursing lost in the bedlam. Near him was Tag, face a white mask, a long-barreled rifle at his shoulder.

"Tag!" Morton yelled desperately. "You and Sully! Get out of the fire—light!"

But Tag didn't move. Lead sang about him, kicked up the fire beside him. Rance dashed toward him, still flinging loads at the swerving riders. Then out of the blur, Morton saw the boy's face jerk toward him, a startled, wild look of horror in his eyes.

"Rance! Rance!"

Above the tumult his voice rose to a stricken cry. He began kneeling as Morton reached him. Knife in hand now, Sully was leaping out into the brush, his shrill cry lifting above the firing. The riders were circling for the inevitable kill.

"Give 'em hell, boys!" Sully was bawling. "Never was no good with a rifle! Me for the pistol and bowie. We'll whup 'em!"

Sully didn't look back. He hadn't seen Tag fall. But now Morton had the boy in his arms, was sprinting toward the ring of black brush.

"Rance! They—got—me! Rance!"

In that terrible moment, Morton glanced down, saw the dark crimson spot on Tag's flannel shirt front. And quiet-mannered, soft-spoken Rance Morton went mad. Tear-blinded, he slid to a halt a hundred feet from

the firelight. Laying Tag down upon the ground, he began shooting again at the dim figures of the hemming circle of riders.

Lead plucked the mesquite about him. But Rance Morton remained unmoved, his bucking guns taking toll. With each buck of his guns he cursed the name of "Killer" McDowell. Sully had disappeared, was probably dead by now. Tag was dying.

Then Morton's guns were empty. Still he stood, his broad shoulders slumped. Out of his dazed eyes he watched the outlaws swoop past, their rifles like blazing torches. He was afraid to look down at Tag. A rider was passing within a few feet of him. Savagely Rance flung his guns at the rider even as a red flame of pain seared his mind.

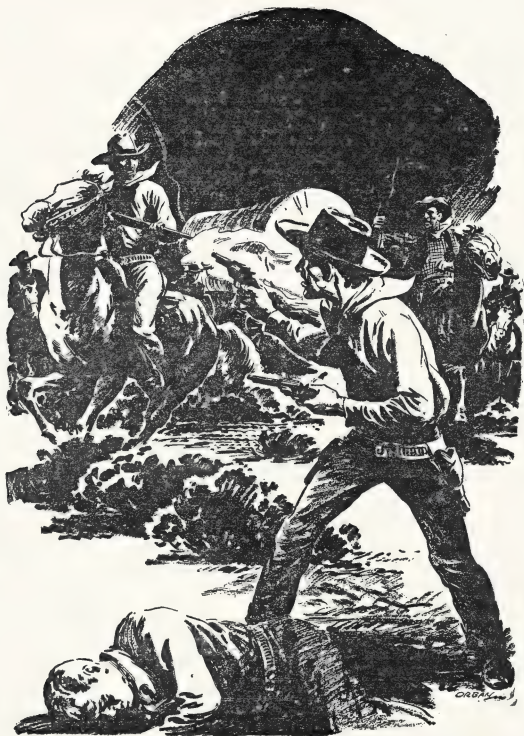
Slowly, like a mortally wounded animal, Rance Morton sank into the thick brush. Blood blinded him and strength poured out of him. For what seemed hours he lay upon the prairie sod beside Tag. Then summoning the last iota of his draining strength, he pulled himself up to his hands and knees. Through a swimming red haze he saw the boy's stark eyes upon him. Appealing, pain-shot eyes looked up into his.

"Rance," Tag whispered. "You've been more—than a brother, Rance—"

A SOB IN his throat, Rance somehow managed to get Tag over his back. On hands and knees he began crawling farther and farther away from the dimming fire. Back of him now rose the jubilant, hoarse yells of the raiders as they reached the wagon.

Still Morton crawled on, his head slumped low. On through the black brush that rose high as a horse's head. Some instinctive urge kept pulling him on to safety. He felt the warm blood trickle down his cheek, felt the heavy burden of Tag's limp body on his back.

After what seemed hours, Rance Morton was dimly conscious of crawling down a rocky bank. Sharp-edged stones cut his hands, but he felt no



Rance Morton began firing at the hemming circle of riders

pain. Like a drowning man he clung to the last vestige of consciousness, fought desperately against the ache of his steely muscles.

Overhead in the starlit heavens a red half-moon shone down upon the brush and the sand and his faltering, crawling movements. Back of him a quarter of a mile a high torch of flame leaped skyward. The wagon burning! The yellow light revealed a dozen heavily armed men riding off into the night.

But Rance Morton didn't see all that. Exhausted, he fell flat in the sand, lay there for moments with his eyes closed. When he reached up to pull Tag off him he touched his brother's hand. It was cold. Through a blur of tears he stared down into the boy's pallid face. Tag's eyes were closed. There was a faint smile on his lips.

The full shock of his grief struck Rance Morton, tearing a bitter, half-sobbed curse past his lips. Grief he had known before, but not like this. For now even deeper than grief was born a new emotion that had never been an essential part of his makeup. Hate! Hate for the cutthroat raiders who had robbed him of his only brother.

Like a man praying, Morton lifted his blood-stained face. The moonlight shone in his dimming eyes.

"I'll kill McDowell," he whispered huskily. "I'll kill him and his men somehow!"

His voice broke. He sank to the ground beside Tag there, not so far west of the *Jornada del Muerte*, while waves of pain engulfed his body and mind and blessed darkness swept down upon him.

II

IN THE chill before dawn, Rance Morton opened his eyes into a world of horrible reality. He lay staring into the stark, dead face of his young brother, while the devilish nightmare of the night's happenings galloped through his mind.

Then conscious of his own aching

body, he pulled himself to his feet. His throat was parched, his lips dry. With probing fingers he felt of the bullet crease across his forehead. Dried blood matted his long blond hair, stiffened his face.

The red-hot ball of the morning sun was just topping the tumbled barren Caballos Mountains. A purplish mist-like haze hung low over the mesquite.

Reeling slightly, Rance Morton trailed back over the furrow he had left in the sand. The smell of smoke stung his nostrils. The sun had risen by the time he reached the smoldering ruins of the covered wagon. Horses' hoofs had churned the dirt. Half-burned belongings that had been in the wagon lay in a heap. The cattle had been driven away, the mules with them.

From the wreckage, Morton picked out a blanket, a broken shovel. Near the cold ashes of the campfire lay a filled canteen. Morton drank deeply. Then with the articles he had taken under his arm he searched through the brush for an hour or more.

"Sully!" he called, again and again. "Sully!"

But there was no answer. Only the desolate loneliness of the desert. Not a living soul was in sight. Not a man's body any place. Yet Morton was positive that some of McDowell's killers had fallen. He had seen that. Undoubtedly Sully also had been killed. Somewhere off in the shifting sands, McDowell and his men likely had buried the bodies.

After washing and dressing his wound the best he could Morton returned to the arroyo where he had left Tag's body. On a high sandy mound he dug a grave. He rolled Tag into the blanket.

Grief tore at his heart as he scooped out the sand. His throat ached and each movement he made was an effort. From the arroyo he carried rocks to put over the sandy mound. At the head of the grave he stuck the broken shovel. It was the best he could do now. Later he would come back to

give Tag proper burial.

Morton knelt beside the grave, a powerfully-built young fellow in faded, dust-smeared denims, humbling himself in the presence of a power stronger than man's—Death! He couldn't hold back the tears. He had loved Tag, cared for him for years since their parents had died.

"Help me, God," Morton murmured hoarsely. "Help me to live long enough to even things with Killer McDowell!"

The sun rose higher. It was sweltering hot. Stiffly, Morton rose. Like a man in a trance, he walked back through the high brush to the trail. Then he followed the wagon tracks he had made the day before.

Noon came and passed, but Rance Morton kept walking, stumbling at times. Out of his slitted, bloodshot eyes he kept peering through the heat waves at the endless, winding trail ahead. Twice he paused to lift the canteen to his lips.

Toward nightfall he topped a hump in the trail, peered down at the river below him. He did not realize it, but only a man of steel and rawhide could have made the trip.

Sleep, weariness tugged at his eyes, but he didn't stop. Down there green cottonwoods and willows flanked the river. The smell of growing things rode the warm evening breeze. He went on, following the course of the river.

Darkness came and a tawny moon

peered down upon the stumbling figure. His head was slumped down on his chest, and much of the time he had no recollection of walking.

Suddenly he looked up with a start. Not far ahead the feeble lights of Santa Ana twinkled. A cluster of 'dobe huts took shape in the moonlight. Heedless of the Mexicans who stared at him from darkened doorways, Morton made his way to a *cantina*.

WHEN HE pushed through the swinging doors, the pock-marked Mexican barkeep stared at him as if face to face with a ghost. A card game in one corner of the room stopped as the swart-skinned players looked up.

"Senor!" gasped the fat barman.

"A drink—and food," Morton told him in Spanish.

Silence in the *cantina* hung heavy while Morton ate his *enchiladas*. The Mexican barkeep studied his trail-dusty figure, and read in Morton's eyes the mingled grief and hate.

"You, senor," he ventured, "and two other men camped in Santa Ana only two nights ago, *es verdad?* And now you are back, on foot—alone."

"The other two men are dead," Morton told him. "McDowell killed them."

"Killer McDowell!" whispered the Mexican. Fear widened his eyes. "Ah, *Dios*, senor, it is not the first time he has struck death on the *Jornada del Muerte*." He crossed himself. "Like

[Turn page]

AMAZING THING! By Cooper

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- REGULAR USE HELPS
RELIEVE ITCHING-SOOTHES
BURNING BETWEEN CRACKED

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the eagles, McDowell and his *pelados* sweep out of their hidden valley in the Caballos. They are evil, merciless, senor. Only will peace come when they are dead."

"They will die," Morton said briefly. "I will kill them."

The barkeep saw the lights in the depths of Morton's eyes and shivered.

"I want a horse, senor," Morton went on. "I'll return in a few days, but whoever lends the horse has only my word."

"A man's word is all that is necessary," said the barkeep wisely. "I have two horses. You may have one."

In fifteen minutes Morton, his canteen refilled, was ready to leave. A horse was waiting for him at the door, a blanket and a sack of jerky with *tortillas* tied to the cantle. Morton mounted tiredly, waved to the fat Mexican in the lighted doorway.

"*Vaya con Dios*," he said quietly.

"*Con Dios*," murmured the Mexican.

A mile out of town, Morton pulled off into a brushy thicket near the whispering river. He made a dry camp, rolled up in his blanket. Every muscle of his body quivered with fatigue, yet when he closed his eyes he couldn't sleep.

Memories roweled him—some bitter; some pleasant. The image of Tag flashed before him, then that of Sully Northrup. Then he was recalling the farewells in his home town he had left behind him. The vision of beautiful Helen Stockton came to him. Hers had been such a strangely cool goodbye that it had rankled him at first.

But he had hardly been away from Helen an hour before he overlooked her cool farewell, thinking what a wonderful girl was this niece of old Hub Stockton, Morton's close friend. Exacting perhaps, but what girl wasn't? Helen had always had her own way, and when she had learned of Morton's plan to move she had pouted, but soon realized his determination could not be altered.

"You'll be so far away, Rance,"

she had told him. "It's a wild, dangerous land where you're going. I wish you'd stay."

Rance Morton had laughed. "Nothin' to worry about, honey," he had soothed. "Once I get up there and get settled, you'll be comin' up—as my wife. And you'll love it."

Her uncle, Hub Stockton, had known that if Helen couldn't change Rance Morton's mind *he* couldn't. The morning Morton pulled out the two men's hands met in a firm clasp.

"Just like your pa, Rance," the oldster grumbled affectionately. "Once your mind is made up all hell couldn't change you. Maybe it's for the best. There's good pasture up around Santa Fe. Careful of that damned Death Trail gettin' there, and watch out for Killer McDowell. He's robbin' about half the wagons that make that trip. Wish you'd stay here and help us with the new freight line Ricker and me's startin'."

IT WAS a wonderful opportunity, Hub had insisted. He and Galt Ricker were getting in on the ground floor. Theirs would be the first regular freight line between their home town of Franklin and Santa Fe. One wagon would go through each week, using the sixty-mile short-cut—the *Jornada del Muerte*.

It had not been Morton's dislike for Galt Ricker that had made him refuse the offer of freight driver. It was simply that he liked the cow business better.

Rance Morton finally slept like a man drugged. At dawn he was up, stretching the stiffness from his muscles. After a cold breakfast he was back in the saddle.

He skirted the sleepy little village of Mesilla, staying in sight of the Rio Grande. The sun rose high in a cloudless sky. Toward noon, he halted in a willow thicket to rest his horse and chew on a strip of jerky. Insects hummed in the sweltering silence.

A whispering breeze played through the cottonwood trees. In a nearby

blackberry grove the horse nibbled at salt grass.

Then Morton mounted and rode on. Some time during the middle of the afternoon he spotted a signal fire off to his left in the Organs. Comanches! Fierce enemies of the white man, fighting bitterly against the invasion of their hunting grounds.

Morton was glad when the purple shadows of evening began daubing the rugged slopes of the Sierra Madres ahead. Depressed, weary, he wondered what the future held for him. With the loss of his herd he was wiped out. All his goods had been burned with the wagon. Tag was dead. And Sully Northrup. In one savage stroke, Killer McDowell and his outlaw band had shattered all his dreams and hopes. For with nothing to offer her, Helen Stockton now would never be his.

He could make no definite plans. Killing McDowell and his deadly crew was all that mattered now. But that was a chore that even the military in Santa Fe had failed to do. For one man even to consider the job seemed foolhardy.

Out of the tumbled, barren hills, Rance Morton rode into the town of Franklin he had so recently left behind him long after nightfall. Like yellow jewels, the lights of the scattered 'dobe village first leaped into view from a hilltop. Like a winding black ribbon the Rio Grande knifed its way through the pass.

Just south of the river El Paso del Norte, one day to be Juarez, lay silent, grim, a Mexican village in whose narrow black lanes knives often flashed. Two villages, flying different flags. Yet both hugging the river, their peoples united in thought and creed.

Mexicans lounged in the deep gloom of the buildings flanking the main street in Franklin. Men jostled in and out of saloons, whisky talk mingling with sibilant Spanish and sing-song Chinese. Spurs chimed and boot-heels clumped along the packed dirt in front of the false-fronted buildings.

From saloons came harsh laughter and excited talk. Saddled horses,

buckboards lined the hitchracks. Somewhere a guitar tinkled.

But to the seething turbulence along the street, Rance Morton paid little heed. Tragedy gloomed his thoughts. It was with reluctance that he was returning.

III

A BLOCK beyond the center of town, Rance Morton reined over in front of a two-story frame building. Light shone from the front windows. Over the door a newly-painted sign read:

STOCKTON AND RICKER FREIGHTERS

Morton dismounted. Stiffly, he strode to the door, opened it. Two men sat at desks, working over papers. They didn't look up at first. Then one of them turned, came slowly to his feet. He was a chubby little man, gray-haired, firm-jawed.

"Rance!" he exclaimed, in surprise.

"Howdy, Hub."

Quiet, deadly, was Morton's voice. He stood there with his back against the door. Fluttery rays from the kerosene ceiling lamp shadowed his gaunt, haggard face. Above the bandanna about his forehead his blond hair was tousled, dust-grimed. He watched Hub Stockton out of bloodshot eyes.

"My God, Rance!" Stockton fairly yelled. "What's the matter? What's happened?" He gripped Morton's hand.

But Rance found it hard to explain. By the desk he saw Galt Ricker rise to his feet like a man with a knife in his back. His black eyes were wide with surprise.

Ricker was a handsome, well-educated man of thirty, suave and sleek as befitted a former gambler. A bullet had at one time seared his right cheek, leaving a white scar which was as distinctive as his flashy clothes and two-color boots. That he had wormed his way into the good graces of Hub Stockton had always nettled Rance.

Galt Ricker strode forward, hand

outstretched. It was a long-fingered hand, white, clammy. Morton accepted it, but with little feeling of friendship.

"Look like you'd been through hell, Morton," Ricker said.

"I have," Morton said tonelessly. "And Tag is dead."

"Dead?" echoed Ricker. His look of sympathy seemed forced to Rance, but he didn't want any of the man's mealy-mouthed condolences.

"Come set down, Rance," Stockton urged softly. "Tell me everything."

They sat down in chairs near the two desks. Briefly Morton told what had happened. In the silence that followed the muted noises from the street filtered in to them. When Hub Stockton rose to his feet, there was a mist in his eyes. His fat face was hard. He paced to the door and back.

"What are your plans now, Rance?" he asked then, gently.

"I have none, Hub," Morton struggled to keep his voice steady. "I wanted you to know that I'll be headin' north soon on McDowell's trail. Killin' him is all that matters now."

"Rather a big job you're undertaking, Morton," Ricker said smoothly.

"Maybe," Morton rose.

Hub Stockton gripped his arms. "Steady, son," he said warmly. "Hearin' the news cuts me deep. You and Tag have been like my own boys."

"I know, Hub."

"That job of freight driver me'n Ricker offered you still stands, Rance," old Stockton continued. "You're one man that can get through. Your pa wheeled the old Butterfield Trail when everybody said it couldn't be done. And you've got the same iron in you. Think it over careful, Rance. Good drivers don't grow on cottonwoods, and we need you. Ricker has lined up six good men to ride guards. Gents who are as hard as hell, but dependable."

"Don't think I'd be interested, Hub," Morton replied. "I'm obliged to you."

Hub Stockton's fat shoulders

slumped. "Every dollar I got I'm gamblin' in this business," he argued. "Sante Fe is yellin' her head off for our trade. It's a chance for us all to clean up. If this first load gets through safe we're made! Otherwise—"

AN IDEA occurred to Morton. If he *did* accept this job he would be covering the dreaded trail, armed for trouble. With gunmen flanking him he would be prepared for a raid by McDowell. It might be the opportunity Morton wanted most of all—killing McDowell.

But Morton didn't voice his thoughts. He started at the sound of silky Galt Ricker's voice.

"Better think it over, Morton," Ricker smiled. "You're not afraid, are you?"

Something seemed to snap in Morton. All at once things went red in front of him, seeing the thin sneer on Galt Ricker's lips. Maybe what happened then was because of the ordeal Morton had been through. Maybe it was because he had always hated Galt Ricker.

Morton's right fist didn't travel far. But it whizzed out like the hoof of a kicking mule, smashing into Ricker's jaw, reeling him back over the desk top. Then Hub Stockton was yelling at Ricker who came to his feet, clawing for his gun, cursing.

"Hold it, Ricker!" Stockton cried desperately. "Morton ain't to blame. He ain't himself!"

Smacking Galt Ricker had been like a popoff valve to Morton's emotions. Cool now, he faced the two men, watched Ricker's right hand drop away from his gun. In Ricker's black eyes was unveiled hate. He carefully wiped the blood from his lips with a white handkerchief.

"We'll forget our personal difficulties—for the time, Morton," he said hoarsely.

"Anyway you want it, Ricker," Morton said quietly.

Galt Ricker got his hat and departed. Hub Stockton looked uneasily at

the closed door. When he glanced up into Morton's eyes he couldn't hide his fear.

"Ricker ain't a man to forget, Rance. I'm afraid you've played hell."

"I've played it before, Hub," Morton said grimly. "Guess I did kind of fly off the handle. But if that job is still open I'll give you my answer about it in the mornin'."

He left while Hub Stockton stared after him, pale eyes freighted with worry.

Morton ate a late supper in a small restaurant. In a Mexican barber shop he got shaved. A hot bath relieved him of much of his weariness. He removed the bandanna about his head, leaving the partially healed wound exposed. The mercantile store hadn't closed yet so from the skinny proprietor he purchased a new outfit, boots and ammunition with the meager funds in his wallet.

When he finally hurried to his horse a desire to see Helen Stockton was goading him, although he had little hope of finding her up at this hour. Yet she might be awaiting the return of her uncle.

Hub Stockton's 'dobe home was a rambling affair on the outskirts of town. As Morton drew near it he was gladdened by the sight of lamplit windows. He pulled up at the picket gate in front of the house, dismounted, and strode quickly toward the front porch.

Helen must have heard him ride up. The front door opened, a shaft of yellow light beaming out past her into the night. With a glad cry she rushed out to meet him, flung her arms about him and kissed him.

"Rance! I'm so glad you're here—safe!"

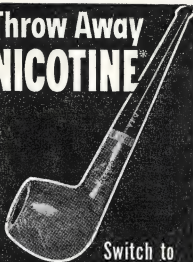
He thrilled to her loveliness. That this beautiful, gold-haired girl had promised to be his wife some day was always a source of wondering contemplation to him.

"Helen," he whispered. "I—"

"Galt told me, Rance."

"Ricker?" He stiffened.

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"And you're hurt, Rance," Helen murmured, gently sympathetic. "That wound on your forehead—"

"It's nothin', Helen. Ricker's been here?"

SHE CLUNG to Morton, her eyes pleading.

"Yes, he was here a few minutes ago. He told me—everything, Rance." Tears suddenly leaped into her eyes. "I'm sorry, Rance—about Tag." She looked away. "Oh, I hate this country! It's violent, wild. I've always

kept hoping that some time we could go to Saint Louis where it is civilized."

"I'd never live in Saint Louis, honey," Rance told her softly. "This is a wild, fierce country, but it's got to be tamed, and it's goin' to take men to do it. I'm goin' to stay. What else did Ricker tell you, Helen?"

Her eyes sought his. "Why, Rance, I believe you're jealous of Galt Ricker!"

"Maybe I am," Morton admitted.

They were silent for a moment. Then Helen said that Ricker had explained to her about offering Morton the freight driving job. She made no mention of the fight. Evidently Ricker hadn't told her about that.

"Please take that job, Rance," she begged. "It'll mean success or failure to Uncle Hub—your driving. If Uncle Hub loses—" Her voice broke and she clung to him. The fragrance of her hair, her trembling closeness stirred deep emotions.

"And if I do," he asked eagerly, "you'll—"

"I'll be waiting," she whispered, "for you."

Despite his tragic thoughts, Morton laughed a little, triumphantly.

They talked for a while longer in whispers, in the darkness of the front porch, then he left her, striding quickly to his horse. Mounting, he rode back toward the center of town. He didn't look back. He didn't see Galt Ricker hurry out of the shadows at the corner of the house, take Helen Stockton in his arms and kiss her. He could not hear Ricker tell her, smiling:

"Good, sweetheart. Rance will take the job and save the day for us."

And Helen Stockton laughed tremulously.

Rance Morton, knowing nothing of all that, rode on. A light was still burning in the freight office in the center of town, but he didn't stop. He wanted to be alone where he could think.

IV

MORTON registered at the Central Hotel. After his horse was stabled and fed, he went up to his room and slept.

Next morning he was up early, shaved, and left his hotel room. He found Stockton alone in the freight office. The oldest grumbled because Morton hadn't spent the night with him. Morton only grinned.

"I'll take that job, Hub," was all he said.

Stockton let out a whoop. "I figured you would, son. Helen was mighty pleased, too."

He went on to tell Rance that Ricker was already out lining up the men who would ride guard. They would pull out in the morning—the sooner the better. Ricker was anxious to grab control of that rich trade.

"I know you don't like Galt," Stockton finished, "but put up with him, Rance. I figure he's honest." He laughed. "You see, he put up the brains and I put up the *dinero*."

"And you don't think you'd better hold off for another month?" Morton suggested. "Wait until the military has a chance to stop McDowell's ram-pagin'."

Stockton shook his head emphatically. "Ricker says if we wait a month somebody will beat us to it. It's now or never."

Morton left the office, and strolled the familiar streets. In some of the saloons he drank and played cards a little, to pass the time. But not once throughout the entire day did he encounter Galt Ricker.

That night he went to see Helen. Hub Stockton was home. They spoke little of the trip the next morning. Stockton tried to be jovial, but his pale eyes were haunted with worry. Once when Helen left the room, he murmured affectionately:

"She's a good girl, Rance. Spoiled, but what the hell? It'll do my old heart good the day you two are married."

When Morton left, he went to his hotel room and slept soundly. At crack of day he was up. After a hurried breakfast he got his horse, went to the freight office. In front of the place was a huge covered wagon, brand new. To it were hitched two spans of mules.

Men lounging on the walk ceased their talk as Morton came up. He went immediately into the office where Hub Stockton greeted him excitedly. On Galt Ricker's lips was a thin smile of satisfaction. Beside him stood a brawny, red-faced man in a fur-lined coat.

Stockton's instructions were brief. In Santa Fe, Morton was to report at the stage line. A representative there would handle the freight and make arrangements for a return load the following week.

"Now I want you to meet your *segundo*, Rance—Ferg Kendall."

Kendall was the big man beside Ricker. His tawny, close-set eyes met Morton's. In a deep bass voice he mumbled something as his heavy hand fell in Morton's. Beneath his great coat bulged a brace of holstered pistols.

Outside, Morton met the other men. There were six of them besides Ferg Kendall—hard-faced, gun-hung men, sullen for the most part. Men who aroused in Morton no particular feeling of friendliness.

Climbing on the schooner seat, Rance Morton took the ribbons, watched the seven men lead their brons up from a corral back of the freight office. Rifle butts jutted from scabbards next to the saddles. The six harnessed mules stirred restlessly.

"Good luck, Rance!" Hub Stockton called. "And *get through!*"

Morton grinned, waved. Broncs wheeled as the guards mounted. Tug chains rattled, jerked taut as the mules strained forward. Wagon wheels creaked in the dusty street where the stir of another day was just beginning.

THE SUN rose higher. It became blistering hot. Dust rose through the swirling heat devils from the huge iron-rimmed wheels. The mules grew wet with sweat, gray from the dust.

At the rear of the wagon rode one guard. There were two on either side. In the lead rode big Ferg Kendall, his Hawkins rifle cradled in his arms.

Toward noon they stopped to eat, one of the guards doing the cooking. It struck Morton then that these men were an uncommunicative lot. They looked grim, tight-lipped, and furtive-eyed, yet seemed efficient enough. After all, most gunmen said little.

The long afternoon passed. Swaying to the motion of his spring seat, thoughts of Helen came to Morton. Then Killer McDowell. He found himself hoping that somewhere on the dread *Jornada* McDowell and his men *would* attack! He was prepared now.

The second day they passed through the sleepy village of Mesilla, then Santa Ana. Here Morton called a halt. The pinto he had borrowed from the Mexican *cantina* owner was tied to the end-gate of the wagon.

Morton returned the animal to the owner, slipped some money into the protesting Mexican's hand. Then Morton was back out on the wagon, lumbering up the dim trail.

They struck the *Jornada del Muerte* that evening. Within a mile of the site of Morton's disaster, camp was made. That night around the campfire Morton first noticed a change in the gun-guards. All along they had obeyed Morton's brief orders with sullen indifference. There had never been any effort made toward friendliness. Instead, around the campfire they had grouped, talked in hoarse whispers, with an occasional low laugh.

Now Morton caught strong whiffs of whisky on their breaths, and on the trail drinking was generally accepted as taboo. But Morton said nothing. He leaned against a wagon wheel, tin plate of food in his lap. Across the small campfire from him,

big Ferg Kendall was muttering to his men.

Uneasiness stirred Morton, as intuitively, he sensed trouble. He hadn't been blind to the growing restlessness of the men, their surliness the past day. Yet why would they cause trouble? Galt Ricker had picked these men—vouched for them, according to Stockton. Ricker had no reason for wanting trouble. If disaster struck this first freight load Ricker would be as much the loser as Hub Stockton.

Trouble, Morton had seen before. There had been plenty of it in his varied experiences along the Border. He had heard his father tell of mutiny among the teamsters on the old Butterfield. And on more than one occasion, Morton had been dragged into rough-and-tumble saloon brawls. But his rock-hard fists had always quelled such trouble.

As was his custom, Morton rolled up in a blanket beneath the wagon that night. The other men slept off a few yards in the brush. Morton heard them mention the name "McDowell." Drunken, muffled talk was followed by raucous laughter, but he heard enough of the talk to arouse ugly suspicions in his mind.

Sleep seemed impossible. He felt of his six-shooter beside his blanket. Close by lay a rifle.

Tense, he listened to the mournful wail of a wolf far out in the brush. The campfire dimmed to red-hot embers that slowly cooled. Overhead in the starlit heavens the full moon shone down upon the brush and the silent camp. Nearby the hobbled mules and the horses stirred, foraging the hay tossed them.

After a time Morton slept.

He awoke with a start. Gray dawn was at hand, the promise of another hot day. The guards were already up, stirring a campfire.

IN AN instant, Morton had on his boots, had the gun-belt strapped about his waist. Sloshing cold water

over his face and drying, he strode toward the fire. The men didn't look up at his approach. Silence held them. An ominous, blood-tingling silence that made Morton's blood run cold with apprehension.

"Better catch up, men," he said quietly.

Their heads lifted as one. Slowly the men who had been hunkered down came to their feet, Ferg Kendall among them. Kendall's eyes were red. His beard-stubbed face was twisted into a wolfish gloating grin.

"There'll be no more catchin' up, Morton," he grated.

"Meanin'?"

"You've given us your last order. From here out it's just us alone."

Now Morton saw the death trap into which he had walked. In another moment guns would be spewing at him. His mind raced, yet outwardly he was cold, apparently unafraid. His slitted eyes looked into each man's leering, evil face.

"You gents were hired to safeguard this load against McDowell's killers," he stalled icily. "You'll stay on the job till we get to Santa Fe—or till the last load is out of my gun. Better think twice, Kendall."

It was all bluff. Morton knew he didn't stand a chance of living another ten seconds. He watched the hands of the seven men sneak to gun-buts. Then Kendall was laughing harshly.

"McDowell's men!" he echoed in drunken triumph. "That's a good 'un! In case you don't know it, we're McDowell's men!"

As if his words were a signal, hands blurred through space, pistol-filled. But none moved faster, surer, than Rance Morton's. Gun thunder ripped the silence of the early dawn. Red blossoms of flame leaped from gun muzzles.

Men yelled, cursed and fell.

Morton didn't feel the pluck of lead from that first deadly blast. Crouched, his eyes burning slits, he triggered shot after shot into the swirling figures before him. Through

the black gunsmoke he saw two men go down, but Kendall was still on his feet, his rageful bellows lost in the bedlam. He obviously hadn't meant to give Morton a chance to live. He hadn't figured on Morton's swift draw.

"Get him!" Kendall was roaring. "Kill him!"

With two slugs left in his gun, Morton tried desperately to drop the big killer. But he knew he had failed, even as a terrible shock numbed his brain and strength poured from his knees. As he struck the ground, Morton thought he was cursing Kendall, but no sound left his lips.

Unable to move, Morton peered through writhing black shadows, barely glimpsed big Ferg Kendall striding toward him through the gunsmoke. There was a pistol in Kendall's hand. Then, human endurance could stand no more and unconsciousness came to Morton like a smothering blanket....

Out of black oblivion, Morton opened his eyes into a pain-tortured world. Biting back a groan he stared up dazedly into a pair of coal-black eyes which peered down at him. Through a blur he saw a circle of swart-skinned faces. Indians with high cheek-bones and heavy features.

Whether they were friendly Caddos or savage Apaches, Morton had no idea. The very fact that he was still alive puzzled him.

The sun was high. From nearby came the stamp of broncs, the muffled pad of moccasined feet in the sand as warriors moved about. Then from their guttural mutterings, Morton knew them to be Caddos.

The chief leaned nearer Morton. He said, "*Techa*."

"*Techa*," Morton repeated weakly, for in his scant knowledge of the Caddo tongue Morton knew the word to mean "friend."

MOST of the Caddos he had known were peaceful planters of pumpkins and maize, who made perennial quests into the hated Apache territory for the vanishing buffalo.

Things were hazy to Morton after that. He felt himself being hauled by *travois* to the Indians' distant lodge to the north. That night he lay on a robe in a tepee, watched the frenzied dancing of a medicine man over him. Fluttery weird light from a campfire outside silhouetted the forms of the half-naked warriors who watched.

Tirelessly the medicine man danced, rattling gourds, chanting his appeals to the only god he knew. From somewhere came the muted throb of tom-toms. The Indian brushed Morton's still form with the soft feathers of a horned owl, sprinkled him with malodorous powder.

Some time later, fat squaws applied healing poultices to Morton's wounds. One bullet had gone through his thigh, one through his right shoulder.

V

DAYS PASSED. There were lucid periods when Morton saw and heard all that happened about him. The Indian men were gone much of the time during the day, out on the hunt. The waddling fat squaws were left behind. And they visited Morton often, dressing his wounds, spooning him broth.

Then there were periods when hideous dreams plagued him, when he rolled and tossed, his beard-stubbed cheeks aflame with fever. Names and faces galloped through his mind. There was the leering, evil face of Ferg Kendall suddenly appearing out of the blackness. Another face Morton imagined to be that of Killer McDowell. Then he thought Helen Stockton was bending over him, pleading with him to live.

But always when Morton opened his deep-sunk eyes, he found himself in the smelly tepee. He was glad now that he had once had that chance to *sabe* as much as he did of the Caddo dialect, for it pleased the fat squaws mightily when his whispered replies were in their tongue.

"You will live, *techa*," one of them

told him. "Already your eyes are no longer dead. It is as the gods want it. We wonder why."

"I must live," Morton told them. "There are two men I must kill."

But many more days passed before Morton could hobble about the camp with the aid of a crutch. It was at the first hint of snow, when the mesquite had browned and the beans had dried. Along the river bottom the cottonwood leaves had yellowed, then fallen before the chill blasts that spoke of winter.

One night the chief paid another visit to Morton.

"We depart soon for the land of the rising sun," he said stoically. "Our hunt is over. Though still weak you are able to ride. We welcome you to go with us if you wish."

Morton smiled. "I thank you for all you have done. But I must leave for Santa Fe."

"You seek vengeance for those who did you wrong?"

"Two men I seek to kill, *techa*," Morton said softly. "One is named Kendall. The other Killer McDowell."

"I know not Kendall," murmured the chief. "But McDowell we know too well. In a valley near Santa Fe he lives, an evil man with an evil tribe who has often stolen from us."

The next morning a fast little dun pony was presented to Morton by the chief. There was a packet of jerky and a bladder of water also offered.

"They are yours," the chief intoned, face expressionless. "We also hate McDowell. Farewell."

So Morton rode out of camp, heading north. He looked back and waved. Hail and farewell! A mist came into Morton's eyes. His dusky friends, the Caddos, were standing in front of their tepees, watching as he rode on through the shadowy timber.

The first night he camped in the pine country. He awoke with a skiff of snow covering his blanket. After a hurried breakfast he was traveling again. He still was weak, stiff, but the crisp, tangy air was like a tonic. His clothes were ragged, his boots

thin, but a heavy fur coat the Indians had given him warmed his chest and stomach. A tattered sombrero failed to hide his shoulder-length blond hair.

The heavy beard that covered his face fit in exactly with his plans. Gaunt and thin, garbed as he was, Morton felt certain that Ferg Kendall would never recognize him. Anyhow, Kendall had undoubtedly left Morton for dead that morning at dawn, along the *Jornada*.

Shadows of evening were daubing the snow-capped, pine-studded *Sangre de Cristos* when Morton reached the outskirts of old Santa Fe. Along a 'dobe-lined lane, he rode into the *Plaza Publico*. Shrill cries in Spanish, the seething raw life of this frontier town stirred Morton like warming wine.

HUGE PRAIRIE schooners rumbled along the rutted main streets. Freighters, mule-skinners, buck-skinned, whiskered trappers stalked the plank walks, their strident bawls loosed to the darkening heavens. Black-frock-coated gents with pale, bland faces eased in and out the swinging doors of the better saloons—*caballeros* from the ranches. *Pelados* scurried along the walks, black eyes alert for prey. Shrill-voiced vendors of tamales were at each corner.

Here in Santa Fe the beaver and buffalo trade had waned, but other trade rocketed. From side streets, deep now in the gloom of night, came the raucous laughter of bearded, hell-bent men, the shrill voices of women. The bellowing of bull-whackers mingled with the tinkling of guitars and mandolins, the throb of drums, and the scuffle of boots on plank floors. Lawless, fierce, wild was this town, where money flowed like wine.

It was here that Morton knew he would eventually get trace of Ferg Kendall, whose trail would lead to Killer McDowell.

At the crowded hitch-pole in front of the stage-office, Morton dismounted. Inside a sallow-faced clerk stepped to the counter to meet him. Suddenly

the clerk stared as Rance advanced. "Something I can do for you, mister?" he mumbled.

Morton knew this clerk, knew him to be a small-time gambler, a one-time crony of Galt Ricker's.

In a husky voice, Morton casually asked when the next Stockton-Ricker freight wagon left for Franklin.

"In the mornin'," said the clerk uneasily. "There'll be two wagons and the stage. They're runnin' together now. Only it ain't the Stockton-Ricker Freight Company now—just Ricker."

A shock raced over Morton, but outwardly he showed no surprise. Bitterness gripped him, though, for he could guess what had happened. With quiet thanks, he turned toward the door, conscious of the clerk's eyes upon him.

He had almost reached the door when his gaze lifted to a huge bulletin board. His blood froze! There, tacked to that board, was a poster, *his* picture on it. And without losing stride, Morton's eyes raked the printed words that said he was wanted for robbery and killing! There was a five-hundred dollar reward for him, dead or alive. Offered by the Galt Ricker Freight Company of Franklin!

Puzzled, hate-roweled, Morton lost himself in the crowd along the walk. He wondered if the clerk had recognized him. He had acted strangely. But through the seething turmoil of Morton's thoughts sheered the savage urge to find Ferg Kendall. He would have to hurry. If the clerk *had* recognized him—

From one saloon to another, Morton wended his way. And always his cold gray eyes moved over the sea of faces. His fur coat and unkempt appearance created no curiosity in the motley crowds.

Then the beguiling strains of a fandango drew him down a gloom-spawned side street. Light splashed through the windows of a long, low-roofed 'dobe building into the crisp dark night. A *baile* was in progress, thronged with charro-garbed dandies

and short-skirted girls of mixed breed. To the rhythm of the Mexican guitars the dancers swayed, jostled around the smoke-filled room.

Three deep around the floor stood the onlookers. Bearded men mostly, drinking from small jugs, eagerly awaiting their turn to dance.

Into this throng, Morton made his way. If Ferg Kendall was in Santa Fe, it would be such a dive as this that he would frequent.

A man's jostling body struck Morton. A hoarse curse spun him about, right hand flashing to the pistol holstered beneath his coat. A bowie knife gleamed. Then Morton's draw froze as the reeling, one-eyed oldster sprang at him.

"Sully!" he cried hoarsely.

THE WIRY little drunk seemed to stop in mid-air. Oblivious of the staring spectators, he blinked his one eye. His bearded jaw sagged. Then he was laughing, shouting, hugging Morton.

"Rance Morton!" he whooped jubilantly. "By gunnie and leapin' hell, I thought you was long dead!"

He checked himself. Too late! Chilling to a stir behind him, Morton whirled, half-drawn gun leveled. Back of him, bowie drawn, Sully Northrup faced the tightening circle of bounty-hungry men who had heard his ejaculation. Sully was cursing himself, barking threats above the sudden confusion.

"Make a move, you coyotes, and there'll be hides all over this buildin' come mornin'!"

But it was to a new threat that Morton turned. In front of him heads were turning toward the door. The music had stopped. Above the confusion a girl's voice rose in shrill warning.

"*Los soldados!*" she yelled.

Morton glimpsed the blue-coated soldiers as they swarmed belligerently through the door, a red-faced Irish corporal in the lead. The crowd stalled his charge momentarily.

"Who answers to the name of Rance Morton?" he shouted furiously. "Yer no deef! Speak up and come in peace or every mother's son of ye will git a clubbin'!"

"The woods is full of clubs, soldier," Sully blatted. "And knives. Who says Rance Morton is here?"

"I'm Rance Morton! What's the charge, Corporal?"

The soldiers were trying to fight their way through to Morton's side. But the drunken bullwhackers who held them back had different ideas. If there was a bounty of five hundred on Morton's head they wanted it.

"Stealin' a Ricker freight wagon!" raged the corporal. "And killin' the crew except one!"

"Which one?" Morton rapped.

"Man by the name of Kendall!"

"Liar!" bawled Sully.

But Morton was already easing back toward a large window, taking the threat-whooping oldster with him. The deadly lights in Morton's deep-set eyes held the snarling pack at bay. His cocked pistol swayed over the crowding group. The soldiers began swearing, adding to the uproar. One of their gun-butts fell, dropping a trapper.

Then hell broke loose!

In one mighty bound, Morton whirled, smashing out the window with his booted foot. Triggering a shot over the heads of the oncoming mob he leaped out into the night as another gun crashed in the bedlam. At his heels came Sully.

Lead whined over their heads as they struck the ground. Sully was swearing, yelling, pointing. Down a narrow black lane they sped as shouts rocketed into the night behind them.

Once the shouts had dimmed, Morton paused in a darkened doorway. He felt Sully clutching his arm. The oldster's red-shot eye shone with excitement.

"By gunnie, Rance," he panted. "Me talkin' out loud damn near got us full of lead that time. But a ghost showin' up couldn't have jarred me more."

"No time to talk now, Sully."

"Not with hell snappin' at our heels. I got the place. Come on."

Through a honeycomb of smelly, dark alleys, Morton followed at the little man's heels. Finally they drew up on the outskirts of Mex Town. Sully ducked into a tiny one-room 'dobe hut, closed the plank door behind them. He struck a match, lit a candle in the neck of a bottle.

"Safe enough now, Rance," he crowed. "Them soldiers couldn't find us with hound dogs."

VI

SULLY'S retreat was a crudely furnished hut. In one corner was an ill-kept bunk. There was but one window and it was covered with a blanket.

At Sully's request, Morton briefly told all that had happened to him since the attack on their wagon that morning when Tag was killed. His voice was bitter, low.

"Tonight I was huntin' Kendall," he finished. "Figured if I could find him I could cut McDowell's sign."

"By gunnie," whispered Sully, shaking his head. "By gunnie."

Then he told how the morning of the attack he had dashed off into the brush. One of McDowell's men had ridden him down, knocked him out. When he had come to the camp was in shambles. The cows were gone.

"You were gone—and Tag," he said mournfully. "I *sabe* how it happened now, but I was half loco then. Bein' no bodies any place I reckoned they'd taken you two prisoners maybe. Or killed you and took the bodies off some place and buried you. Anyhow I found a stray horse."

Hoping for vengeance against McDowell, Sully had finally made his way to Santa Fe. He had been there ever since.

"Killin' McDowell is all that matters now, Sully," Morton murmured tightly. "So far as clearin' my name—"

He stopped. There was a strange

smile on Sully's lips.

"It's funny, Rance," he said queerly. "Funny as hell the way things happen. I know where McDowell is."

"You do?"

Sully's one eye lowered. He nodded. "Sure I do, Rance. What'll you do if I take you to him?"

Morton was on his feet now, face pale beneath the beard. Hate drenched his eyes.

"I'll kill him, Sully," he said softly.

But Sully Northrup shook his head. "No, you won't, Rance," he answered slowly. "You'll do the same thing I did."

He stepped quickly to the door, giving Morton no chance to ask questions. Perplexed, Morton followed him outside.

"Foller me," Sully Northrup said shortly.

Again through a tangle of dark lanes he led the way at a trot. Snow was beginning to fall, the stinging cold wind whining around the corners of the buildings. Candlelight shone from some of the buildings, but for the most part they were dark.

Sully was avoiding the center of town. Morton trailed at the little helion's heels, wondering. Once they passed a staggering Mexican who bawled a drunken challenge at them. But they ducked past him.

Suddenly Sully stopped before the doorway of a small hut. Quickly he glanced about in the darkness, then knocked. Feeble light slipped through the cracks in the door. From inside, Morton heard a startled voice whispering something. A girl's voice! And Morton found himself trembling, hand dropping to the gun beneath his coat. He had prayed for this moment. Over Tag's grave he had made a vow to kill McDowell. Now—

Sully's low whisper struck above the wailing wind. "It's me, Marsha. Sully."

The bolt of the door moved. The door opened. Feeble candlelight fell upon the two men. Then Sully stepped quickly inside, Morton at his heels, and the door closed.

Morton never knew how the gun came into his right hand. Stunned, he looked at the girl facing him. One of her hands flew to her lips, muffling her cry.

"Hold it, Rance," Sully said quickly. "This is Marsha McDowell." He turned, nodded to a thin, pale-faced man who had risen to his elbows on a cot. "And this is—"

"Colonel Clinton McDowell," murmured the man bitterly. He bit back a cough, a twisted smile coming to his bloodless lips. "Sully has told us about you, Morton. Pull up a chair."

HE DIDN'T seem to see the gun in Morton's hand. And Morton made no move, no sound. Disappointment jarred through him like a shock. If this was Killer McDowell there was no fight left in him. Morton had always envisioned a huge brute of a man as McDowell. A man with a savage snarl on his lips. A gunman whom Morton could taunt, then kill as he would a snake.

Slowly Morton's gun lowered. Shaken with mingled emotions, he looked from face to face. Then his gaze returned to the sick man.

"You're Killer McDowell?" he asked hoarsely.

"Only in name," the man admitted weakly.

Sully smiled sadly. "You're doin' what I done, Rance. I came here to kill McDowell, but I didn't. Looks like we got our ropes snarled. Let McDowell tell you."

Morton moved toward the bedside. He hardly noticed the girl. But the three of them in that room grouped around the sick man, listened to a tale of tragedy and despair. There was little doubt that Clinton McDowell was telling the truth. His pasty white face grew flushed. At times he choked back a racking cough that came from deep in his tortured lungs. He seemed to know his days were numbered.

"I was a colonel in the army, Morton. Word reached me that my—my wife was ill, dying. I knew that

granted leave was impossible at the time, so I—I ran away, deserted. I got home too late. But I couldn't go back to the army. I was a deserter and to return meant death. Marsha was only a small girl then. We escaped, came to this country."

He had taken up a homestead in a secluded valley south of Santa Fe, had begun ranching in a small way. Coming into Santa Fe one day for supplies he had bumped into a Captain Dean who knew that Colonel McDowell was still wanted by the law.

McDowell's eyes smoldered with hate. Above the blanket his bony hands clenched.

"Dean was with me in the army, Morton," he said huskily. "He trailed me to the valley, fetched his men. They were cutthroats, killers. They built a camp in the valley, began rustling at first. That led to worse things. They used my name and I couldn't leave. I couldn't even fight. It was hell, Morton. God alone knows what I suffered. I was afraid for Marsha. We were prisoners until one night a week ago we escaped—"

A paroxysm of coughing shook him. His eyes closed. There was silence except for the moan of the wintery wind outside.

"Sabe, Rance?" Sully whispered.

Morton could only nod. His eyes were frozen on the pallid face of Killer McDowell, the man he had come to kill. He barely heard Sully tell him how he first discovered McDowell. Three nights ago. Marsha had sneaked out for food. Some ruffians had stopped her.

"I come up just then," Sully explained, "and got her away. The rest you know. This Ferg Kendall skunk you mentioned is Dean's right bower. They're the ones we want."

"We've got to find them, Sully," Morton muttered grimly.

"Kendall and—and his men are in town searching for us now. That's why we are hiding out here. I don't know what we would have done without Mr. Sully."

Morton started to the sound of the

girl's voice. A rich voice, soft with Southern warmth. Morton rose, and she came to her feet. Their eyes locked. A surge of strange emotions warmed Morton's veins. He had hardly noticed her until now.

He had never seen a girl quite so lovely. Dark hair framed her sun-tanned cheeks. Her eyes were deep pools, troubled with worry. But there was something deeper than her beauty that struck Morton. There was something brave and wholesome about her. Being dressed in buckskin shirt, boots and woolen blouse only added to her charm.

"Marsha," Morton murmured.

RANCE HARDLY knew why he called her name. Her lips parted, and still their eyes clung. Then as if some powerful magnet were at work they moved toward one another.

"Rance—Rance Morton," she whispered.

They forgot Sully until he said, "We've got to help 'em get away, Rance. Kendall and his skunks are scourin' the town for McDowell to kill him."

"We've got a little money," Marsha said tremulously. "If we could only get out of town, go some place away from those beasts!"

"You hate the valley then?"

"Not the valley," the girl said. "It is beautiful. It was wonderful living there until Kendall and Dean came. We saw little of Dean, but Kendall—" She shuddered.

Morton remembered the clerk in the freight office telling him of the stage leaving in the morning, along with freight wagons. He told Sully and the girl about it. They could take the stage to Mesilla. There they could catch a stage to California.

New hope came into the girl's eyes, but it was quickly followed by despair.

"How will we get on the stage without being seen?"

"We'll tend to that."

"But you, Rance?" she cried. "You and Mr. Sully?"

Morton brushed aside her fears. There was nothing for them to fear, he told her. He suddenly found himself thinking only of getting Marsha McDowell and her father to safety. Later he could trail down Kendall and this Captain Dean.

The girl ran to the bedside. Colonel McDowell's eyes were open. He must have heard what had been said.

"Father, you heard? We're leaving—"

"I heard, honey."

Morton felt Sully's gaze upon him. Sully knew the chance they were running in getting the girl and her father on the stage. Yet it seemed the only way.

When the girl hurried into the adjoining room to pack their scant belongings, Colonel McDowell's tear-misted eyes sought Morton's.

"I want to thank you, Morton," he said gratefully. "Maybe there is a chance."

McDowell sounded like a man praying, saying that. When his eyes closed, Sully glanced at Morton, grinned.

"And the devil take the hindmost," he grunted.

"Shut up, Sully," Morton said softly.

No further word passed between them. From the other room came sounds of Marsha McDowell moving about. Already it was past midnight. Outside the storm was raging, snow sifting in beneath the plank door.

In one corner of the room was a small fireplace, with sticks of wood stacked nearby. Morton built a fire to busy himself. It took the chill from the room.

Soon Marsha joined them, a battered valise in one hand.

The hours dragged past. The three of them talked in low whispers, planning, voicing their hopes, while McDowell slept. He looked like a corpse in the fluttery candlelight. Like a dirge the snow-swept wind moaned outside.

Morton said little. He found his

eyes straying to Marsha McDowell. And always when he looked at her their eyes met. Morton found himself comparing her with Helen Stockton. Somehow the memory of Helen seemed vague, remote, something out of the past.

"I talked with a freighter the other day," Sully said. "He said Hub Stockton was broke. Ricker borrowed money and took over the business."

"I guessed that, Sully," Morton answered.

Sully didn't mention Helen. And Morton was glad. Toward dawn they had a bite of breakfast. The stage usually pulled out shortly after day-break.

It was plain that every move Colonel McDowell made was an effort, taxing the last ounce of his strength. He bundled himself in a heavy coat, pulled a hat low over his feverish eyes. Marsha donned a man's mackinaw.

"All set?" Morton asked quietly.

"Ready," McDowell said, and nodded.

Day was already at hand. Six inches of snow carpeted the ground and the flat roofs of the 'dobe buildings. They moved through the unbroken snow of the narrow lane, Sully in the lead with Marsha. Behind them, Morton walked with McDowell, holding the sick man's arm to assist him.

VII

THE TOWN of Santa Fe was still asleep. But when Morton, Sully, and the two McDowells came out into the *Plaza Publico* they saw two huge covered wagons and a stage standing in front of the freight office. Two or three bundled men were moving about, swinging their mittened hands to keep warm, talking. Already there appeared to be a passenger or two in the stage.

Then Morton stiffened. One of those men he recognized as the sallow-faced clerk he had talked with last night. He stopped, calling a soft warning to Sully. The four of them

stepped back into a doorway.

"Guess you can make it now," Morton told McDowell and his daughter. "It's *adios*, I guess."

There were unshed tears in Colonel McDowell's eyes when he bade Morton good-by. His finely-chiseled features were white as the snow. When Marsha came up to Morton her lips were trembling.

"Good-by—Rance," she whispered, a choke in her voice. "I'll remember you always. God bless you."

Morton and Sully watched Marsha and her father trudge through the snow, climb into the stage. Morton would always remember the way the frosty breath had passed her lips when she said good-by.

He felt a cold hand creep over his heart.

Tides-of warning swept across his mind.

Whips cracked. Loud whoops from the drivers cut through the early morning silence. Mules plowed through the snow, the huge wagons behind them. The *Jornada del Muerte* lay ahead—maybe death. *Quien sabe?*

A hand waved as the stage creaked past. It was Marsha's. Morton lifted a hand of farewell. With Sully at his side, he watched the caravan round a corner down the street, and it seemed as if something had gone out of his life.

He was not aware of the group of men who suddenly rushed out of the freight office behind him and Sully. One of the men was the sallow-faced clerk, eyes wide with excitement. He was pointing, showing three uniformed soldiers the two lone men whose backs were turned.

"That's him!" the clerk shrilled. "Get him!"

Morton whirled, right hand flashing gunward. Too late! The soldiers were on him, their pistols leveled.

Bowie knife in hand, Sully stood waiting. Ignoring the harsh warning of the charging soldiers, he roared:

"By gunnie, Rance!"

"No use, Sully!"

Morton was not a coward, but one wrong move now meant death, and he knew it. He lifted his hands. So did Sully.

"Pretty smart, Rance Morton," one of the soldiers barked. "You freight-robbin' polecat! Easy now or we'll shoot you an' One Eye here. Take 'em, boys!"

Morton submitted to arrest, to the quick binding of his wrists behind his back. He fought back his blinding rage. Ahead lay what the frontier towns call quick justice. A hurried court trial, the inevitable verdict of guilty. Guilty of freight-robbing and killing! That could mean but one thing—death!

The soldiers made a hurried trip to the jail with their two prisoners. Sully, swore like a mule-skinner every step of the way.

"Damn it, Rance!" he fumed. "Some son of hell's goin' to pay with a scalpin' for this!"

"Steady, old-timer."

It was a damp, gloomy jail, just off the main square. The local constable took charge of the prisoners once they were in the cell. He was a bony-faced man with sneaky eyes. When the soldiers departed he peered through the iron-barred door.

"Killers, huh?" he sneered. "Two ringy ones, eh? Well, you won't be ringy long. The scaffold buildin' will start this evenin'." The man chuckled maliciously.

"Hell's full of scaffolds, Sneaky!" Sully bawled. "But I'll lay you my bowie agin your dirty hat we don't hang."

THE CONSTABLE made a snarling sound meant for a laugh. The man had been drinking. He likely would talk, Morton thought. And there were some questions he wanted answered.

"Who put up the five hundred reward for me, Constable?" he gritted.

"Mr. Galt Ricker of Franklin, that's who!" snapped the lawman. "He'll likely ride up here to testify

agin you. But if he don't, Ferg Kendall will be here. You had a lot of nerve, Morton, tryin' to kill all them gun-guards so's you could steal the wagon plunder."

Cold fury pounded at Morton's temples. Things were even more puzzling. The moment the constable departed, he turned to Sully.

"I can't *sabe* it yet, Sully," he gritted fiercely. "On the trail that morning Kendall and his men left me for dead. I figure I plugged a couple of 'em. But I didn't kill them all except Kendall, like the corporal blurted last night. It don't tally—that reward poster, and the law wantin' *me*."

"Two and two makes four, Rance," Sully muttered wisely. "I been doin' a lot of thinkin' since I met you. It can only mean one thing—"

A hunch hit Morton like a blow. "More than one thing, Sully!" he ground out. "It means that Kendall and his men grabbed the wagon and goods and disposed of it. To keep the law off his own tail, Kendall came into Santa Fe alone and made out I'd killed all the men but him. And he's told them *I* stole the load!"

"And this *jefe* of renegade valley, Captain Dean, is settin' back in the valley laughin' at what a smart right bower he's got in Kendall," Sully grated savagely. "You're thinkin' fast, Rance. Keep it up. Not that thinkin' is goin' to get us out of this hole."

"Only one thing more, Sully. Why did Galt Ricker hire Kendall and his cutthroats? Or did it just happen?"

Miserably, Sully shook his head. "You figure it out, Rance. I need a drink."

Morton began pacing the cell like a caged puma. Each passing hour seemed like an agonizing eternity. Through the maelstrom of his seething, hate-filled thoughts flashed the memory of Marsha McDowell. Then there was Tag, Hub Stockton and Helen.

At noon the sneaky-eyed constable fetched them food, mocked them, then left. The sun set early that even-

ing, deepening the gloom of the cell. It grew colder and the wind came up.

When the constable came back to the cell with two plates of beans for their supper, his eyes were bloodshot from drink. A drunken grin curled his lips.

"Trial's tomorrow," he gloated. "They can't find Kendall to testify, and they ain't goin' to wait for Galt Ricker. We fix gents in this here town."

Morton was gripping the iron bars of the door, with Sully beside him. Every muscle in Morton was trembling for action. Hope galloped rampant through his mind. He had been waiting for this moment. He smiled icily.

"And how you bettin', Constable? Hangin' or freedom?"

The lawman shoved the plates of beans under the door. His head jerked up in surprise. Morton's two arms shot through the bars with the speed of a striking snake. A terrified scream broken from the lawman as Morton's hands found the scruff of his neck. He tried to jerk loose, to draw his gun. With a terrific heave, Morton jerked Sneaky off his feet, smashed his head against the bars.

The man's head made a sickening thudding sound as it struck the steel bars. His eyes closed. He went limp, spilling to the floor as Morton released him. Sully was cursing and laughing in glee at the same time.

"Dang my soul, Rance!" he whooped. "Never seen nothin' slicker. Let me out of here so I can tromp him!"

"Forget that, Sully! We're leavin'!"

MORTON WAS reaching through the bars, desperately tearing the huge key ring from about the unconscious lawman's belt. His flying fingers found the right key. Then the door was unlocked.

In one bound, Morton was outside in the corridor. Stooping over the lawman, he unbuckled the man's holstered gun and ammunition pouch. Sully raced to the front door. When Mor-

ton joined him Sully had found his beloved "scalpin' knife." From a wall peg he snatched down a holstered pistol, strapping it about his waist.

Heart pounding like a trip-hammer, Morton leaped to the door. Santa Fe had come to life. From the street outside came the muted murmur of voices, the grind of wagon wheels. And ahead lay the promise of freedom or death.

"Ready, Sully?"

The little hellion grinned, cold as death. "Ready, son! Lead on, and anybody that gets in our way give 'em hell!"

"Grab the first saddled horse you see!"

Morton ripped the door wide. A man stood framed in the doorway! The belligerent corporal who had tried to capture Morton at the dancehall last night. He had been just preparing to enter the office. Thunderstruck, he stared. Morton's steely right fist lashed out with his full weight behind it. It caught the corporal between the eyes. His body seemed to fly through space. He fell in a snow bank edging the street, and didn't move.

Outside, Morton sprinted toward a hitch-rack, with Sully at his heels. From farther down the dark street came a strident bawl of alarm, lifting above the other noises. Men were suddenly running toward the jail from both directions, yelling, their figures plain as they leaped through the splashes of yellow lights from the store fronts.

"The jail!" rose the cry. "Prisoners escapin'!"

"They high-tailed down this way!" Sully roared. "We're after 'em!"

His cry only added to the confusion. Men were afraid to shoot in the darkness. They milled, whooping, cursing, asking questions. Then Morton and Sully had found horses, and were spurring off like demons, before the first shot was fired.

Bent low over their plunging horses' necks, they roared down the gloomy street toward the *Plaza Publico*. Lead sang about them, plumping into the

snow slush at their flying horses' heels. High above the dimming bedlam at their backs rose the rage-choked howl of the Irish corporal who had evidently come to life.

When the plaza was behind them and they were thundering toward the edge of town through a narrow lane, Morton caught his breath. He hipped about in the kak, saw Sully trailing, waving his bowie. Undaunted by the pursuit that was bound to come, Sully let out a war-whoop that hearkened of the old days.

"By gunnie, Rance! That soldier must of thought you hit him with a wagon tongue!"

Morton didn't try to answer. But he grinned, thrilling to the courage and loyalty of this knife-wielding oldster.

On a high wind-swept hill, Morton called the first halt. In the shadows of some timber, the two men sat their winded horses, listening for sounds of pursuit. An icy wind played through the tree-tops. Morton knew they would have to hurry. Unless more snow came—and quickly—it would be an easy matter to cut their trail.

VIII

RANCE MORTON recalled the instructions Colonel McDowell and Marsha had given him about how to reach Hideout Valley, as they had called their former home, now an owl-hoot roost. Just before leaving McDowell's hut they had told him it lay straight south of Santa Fe a few hours' ride. They couldn't miss it if they kept in a bee-line due south.

"Think you can find the valley in this storm, Rance?" Sully asked anxiously.

"We'll have to chance it, Sully."

"And me with one eye," mourned Sully.

Morton and the little man rode on. It grew bitter cold, wind howling through the timbered lanes, sweeping around high buttes. Despite his fur coat, Morton's teeth chattered, his

feet and hands became numb from the cold. He knew Sully was suffering, with only his rawhide jacket. Morton peeled off his coat.

"Take it, Sully," he ordered.

Sully could hardly make the words come, he was so cold.

"Hell's full of hot days, son. Keep your coat. I'm all right."

Morton didn't argue. He knew Sully was freezing. He made the little oldster crawl into the coat and, grumbling, Sully accepted the warmth it offered. With only a denim jacket now, Morton felt the wind cut through him like a knife. But he gritted his teeth and went on.

After a while a pale moon cast a ghostly haze over the pine-studded hills, the snow-clogged arroyos, as Morton led the way through drifts, up hills and down. He grew drowsy. His eyelids felt weighted with lead. Every slight move he made with his arms and legs was torture. The dull thud of the horses' hoofs on the frozen ground seemed far away.

Once he glanced back. Sully was riding hunched over, his coonskin-covered head slumped low.

Somewhere ahead lay Hideout Valley. Intuition told Morton that he would find Ferg Kendall there. And Captain Dean—whoever he was. There also would be the others who had been among the raiders when Tag had been killed and Morton's life wrecked. Living long enough to get into the valley and kill some of those men was all that mattered to Morton now. There was not one chance in a hundred of him and Sully ever riding out again, but if Morton could settle with Kendall and this Dean gent, he felt that his vow over Tag's grave would be fulfilled.

"Rance?"

Sully's soft cry came to Morton like a voice in a dream. He jerked erect as the little man pulled up beside him. They were on a high ridge.

Down below them lay a valley, a perfect oval.

"That's it, Rance!" Sully croaked excitedly. "Them's cabins down

there! We've found the place."

In a snow-blanketed clearing stood a cluster of log cabins, plain in the moonlight. Smoke rose lazily into the night air from some of the chimneys. Square patches of light from some of the windows were like sinister eyes in the gloom.

In front of the largest cabin stood a dozen or so saddled horses.

A new flood of hate raced through Morton, deadening the chill. His fighting jaw set. There would be no blundering now.

"Chances for livin' are slim if you follow me, Sully," he gritted. "A posse is likely trailin' us. You've still got a chance to circle the valley and head for Franklin."

Sully's lips were pulled back over his stained teeth. Frost whitened his whiskers, made him look weird in the dim light.

"Tag was like my own kid, Rance," he said shortly.

Without another word, Morton eased his bronc down the steep slope, Sully following. Halfway down, Morton jerked reins, alert now, every sense attuned to danger. The whisper of death seemed to ride the cold wind. And on that wind rode the hint of hoofbeats, the yells of men.

"Listen!" Sully whispered.

ACROSS THE valley from them a string of heavily loaded mules was being hazed toward the center of the log-cabin village! At least eight mules with packs on their backs were trudging across the snow. Four riders were whipping them along.

"They've plundered another wagon train, Sully!" Morton said softly.

Not until the mules were driven into a pole corral back of the big cabin did Morton make a move. Then he headed straight down the slope. On the valley floor, when they reached a patch of pines, not a hundred yards ahead of them lay one of the outlying cabins, windows glowing with lamplight.

From huge corrals and sheds back

of the cabin came the low moan of cattle. Morton slipped to the ground, his knees almost buckling beneath him. Drawing his gun, he motioned to Sully. Slowly, cautiously, they circled the cabin, came up back of the sheds.

In the black shadows of the corral, Morton suddenly stopped, an inaudible curse escaping him. He was looking over the pole enclosure, staring at the restless cattle inside. In the silvery moonlight, their brands were visible. Circle M brands!

"Sully! That's what left of my herd!"

Seeing his cattle here did something to Morton. Fresher than ever, it brought memories of Tag. Tag had worked those cows. Morton had given him ownership of half of them.

With Sully's soft, warning cry in his ears, Morton sprinted across the moonlit space toward the cabin. He was flat against the logs when a rear door burst open. Within arm's reach of Morton a man with a leveled rifle bolted outside in the shaft of light. The man saw Sully, but not Morton. Startled, the man's rifle jerked to his shoulder. Morton leaped like a cougar, his gun-butt arcing down. It caught the outlaw in the back of the head, downing him like a pole-axed steer.

Sully was in the light now, trying desperately to say something, pointing behind Morton. There was somebody in the doorway! Even as Morton whirled a girl screamed.

"Rance!" she sobbed hysterically. "Rance!"

It was Marsha McDowell!

Morton stood staring like a man transfixed, gun gripped in his fist.

"Marsha!" he finally managed.

She rushed to him, and he took her into his arms as if she were a small child seeking protection. What she was saying made little sense at first.

"Dad's dead, Rance!" she sobbed. "Killed! Now—"

Her voice broke and Morton, suddenly realizing their danger out here, rushed her through the cabin door.

Sully dragged the body of the outlaw guard in after them, closed the door.

"Out like a lamp, Rance!" he cackled.

"Better tie him up, Sully," Morton said grimly, and turned to Marsha McDowell. "Now tell me why are you here?" His voice was stern.

She had a grip on her emotions now. "It all seems like a horrible nightmare, Rance," she told him as steadily as she could. "I thought we were safe when the stage left Santa Fe, but—"

The horror of all she had seen was still in Marsha McDowell's dark eyes. This afternoon, she explained, only a short way from Santa Fe, Kendall and Captain Dean's men had swooped down out of the hills.

"It came so sudden, Rance. The first I knew they were on us, shooting, killing! It was terrible! Men dying, the wagons burning. Most of the freighters were killed, I guess. Kendall came to the stage. I'll never forget the awful way he laughed when he saw—Dad. And Dad tried to fight, Rance. Somebody must have struck me. The next I knew Kendall had me in his arms. He and some of the other men were hurrying back here to the valley."

THEY HAD fetched her here, a prisoner. Those loaded mules that had just entered the valley were carrying the loot from the freight wagons. As Morton had already guessed, the man he just knocked out was a guard Kendall had placed here to watch Marsha.

"And Kendall," Morton muttered. "Where is he now? And this Captain Dean?"

"Down at the big cabin, Rance," Marsha told him. "The men all live there. This cabin was Dad's and mine. The Indians helped us to build it. Then Tonca—"

"Tonca?"

Marsha explained that Tonca was an old Indian woman who had lived with them. She had cared for Marsha and Colonel McDowell as if they were

of her own blood.

"She went with us as far as Santa Fe when we escaped from here," Marsha hurried on. "We left her there."

Sully had the unconscious guard bound. Morton strode swiftly into the front room. It was a huge room, with logs flaming in a rock fireplace at one end. Morton was at the front door when Marsha reached him.

"Where you going, Rance?"

"To kill Kendall and Dean!" He ignored her hands on his shoulders. "Sully, take Marsha out the back way. Run for our horses. You two ride for Santa Fe!"

"Ride hell, son!" Sully rapped. "You're not leavin' me out of this skunk-killin' spree!"

"Rance!" Marsha cried pleadingly. "They'll kill you! Neither of you will have a chance against that bunch of killers! There's at least fifteen of them!"

"It's our only chance, Marsha!" Morton said firmly.

"We can all three escape, Rance!" she begged. "We'll go some place—any place! Forget what's happened."

She stopped, her stark eyes flooded with tragic hopelessness, for Morton already had the door open. His pistol came into his right hand. His blue-gray eyes looked like ice.

"You're taking Marsha and getting out, Sully!" he rapped savagely. "You've got to! Damn it, this is no time to think of ourselves! Promise me—"

"I promise," Sully said queerly. Then Morton was gone, the door closing behind him. "But here's one time my promise ain't worth a damn," Sully whispered.

Marsha leaned weakly against the log wall, her eyes closed, face pale as death.

"Help him, oh God!" she choked. "Help him!"

And Sully Northrup, who was breaking a promise, stood like a stricken man in the center of the room, his one eye blinking.

Outside, Morton's slitted eyes raked

the shadows as he sprinted toward the center of the outlaw village. There were eight or ten cabins, flanking the semblance of a street. In the midst of them stood the large log central building, its glass-paned windows yellow with light. The saddled horses still stood in front of it.

All the other cabins were dark, and the moon had gone down. That was in Morton's favor. The wind had died. Drifted snow was piled up against the black logs of the building.

Gun in hand, Morton made straight for the corrals at the rear of the lighted building. No plan had as yet offered itself to him. He would have to wait. He had six loads in his gun. If luck rode double with him he might get Kendall and Dean before the others in the bunch downed him. But with those two dead, the backbone of the outlaw clan would be broken, and Morton's debt would be paid.

In the black shadows of the log hut adjoining the big building, Rance Morton stopped. Flat against the wall, he caught his breath, hearkening to the sound of men's hoarse voices coming from the main cabin. Boot heels thumped against the plank floor as those men moved about. Loud, drunken talk filtered out into the cold night. From the darkness at the rear came sounds of the animals moving about in the corral.

WITH SUDDEN decision, Morton dashed toward the rear of the building. Heart pounding, he rounded the corner, stopped to get his bearings. He had hoped to find a rear door, but there was none. Just beyond him was a lighted window. Slowly, he moved through the drifted snow toward it. An uncanny premonition of unseen danger roweled him. He felt another presence somewhere in the darkness near him. Yet he had seen no one since leaving Marsha and Sully.

Almost at the window, Morton froze! Low voices reached him. One was the raspy, familiar voice of big Ferg Kendall. The other—

Through the frosted pane Morton

saw two men sitting at a crude table in a small back room. A lamp was on the table, with a black bottle and two glasses. Stunned, Morton stared—not at Ferg Kendall, but at the man opposite him. And in that instant every suspicion that Morton might have had was proved true. Through the seething turmoil of his thoughts struck the realization that the naked truth had been revealed.

The man in the room with Kendall was Galt Ricker!

IX

KENDALL was obviously drunk.

His tawny eyes were beady, bloodshot. In his huge hairy hand he lifted a filled glass to his lips, drained it. About his thick waist were his two pistols.

"You're just boogery, Dean," he rumbled.

Ricker smiled icily. "Captain Dean to you, Kendall."

Kendall scowled, one hand fingering the butt of his gun. A deadly tension came between the two men. Their eyes duelled. But Galt Ricker was the stronger of the two. Hate, contempt for this brawny, uncouth man across from him was in his eyes. His thin lips curled in a cold smile. The scar on his right cheek looked like a strip of torn paper.

"Well, say what you got to say, Dean!" Kendall blurted harshly. "Me'n the men—"

"You and the men are fools, Kendall!" Ricker suddenly snarled. "I'm still jefe of this camp and you're the *segundo*. Remember that, Kendall. Make a funny move now and I'll kill you before your gun leaves leather. I know you've been arousing the men against me."

"That's a lie, Dean!"

Ricker's handsome face darkened with fury. "We'll settle that later, Kendall. I didn't order you to plunder that wagon train and coach today. Nobody but a thick-headed fool would have done that. Already the law is hounding us out of Santa Fe. They

won't quit now till they track us down."

"Maybe—"

Ricker was on his feet now, eyes blazing. "Maybe be damned! You're a blundering fool, Kendall! You blundered when you rode off and left Rance Morton for dead. I told you to finish him! Today you grab that wagon train, kill old McDowell and fetch the loot here—through the snow. By dawn the law will be trailing you. And the girl—"

"She's mine, Dean," Kendall cut in hoarsely. He was afraid of Ricker. He showed it. "You use to wouldn't let me get near her. But I got her an' I'm goin' to keep her!"

"Take her!" Ricker grated. "I'm through. You're going to buy me out."

Both men were standing now. They had started toward the door to the front room where the other outlaws were waiting when the smashing of a window pane spun them about, hands clawing frantically at guns. Then they froze, the fear of death drenching their eyes.

"Rance Morton!" Galt Ricker choked incredulously.

Morton's head and shoulders were framed in the broken window against the black night. His leveled pistol was poked into the room.

A startled shout came from the front room. Boots clumped on the floor. Still Morton didn't shoot. He watched fear give way to terror in the two men's eyes. Watched their hands start a downward sneak toward their guns. Then Morton's hate-choked words came like the clash of gun-barrels.

"Hell's callin' you two skunks! Here's the payoff for killin' my brother and McDowell!"

Ricker's gun was clear of leather when Morton fired. Gun thunder shook the room, deadening Kendall's bellowed oath and Galt Ricker's pain-filled scream. Kendall's frenzied shot burned Morton's cheek. Then the big ruffian was on the floor, rolling, dodging, triggering wild shots at the window.

Through the black smoke, Morton glimpsed Galt Ricker's slow fall to the floor. Ricker was clutching at his chest with both hands, blood seeping between his white fingers. His black eyes were like the sightless eyes of a corpse. He fell just as the door caved in and his outlaw band poured into the room.

Morton ducked away from the window as a hail of lead ripped out into the night. Cursing because he had failed to kill Kendall, he ran blindly toward the corner of the cabin. Tumult suddenly filled the outlaw camp as men came roaring into the open.

MORTON rocked back on boot heels as the dim figures came churning out of the night straight toward him. One of them saw him, whooped triumphantly as his gun flamed. Then they were all shooting as Morton fired once and ducked toward the shelter of the corral. One of the bunch fell into the snow, but the others came on, their hoarse curses filling the night.

Lead sliced through the snow all around Rance Morton. His life seemed charmed. One bullet seared his ribs, half whirling him as more lead smacked into the poles of the corral.

"Here he is, Kendall!" rose a cry. "Headin' for the corral."

"Kill him!" screamed another shrill voice.

With the blood-lusting pack at his heels, Morton vaulted over the corral gate. He could almost feel the hot breath of death on the back of his neck. Only the black night was saving him.

Across the muddy corral he raced. The mules, frightened by the firing, squealed, milled about him. Flying hoofs spattered him with snow and mud. Here was a new threat he hadn't counted on—being trampled to death.

Back of him the outlaws were ripping open the corral gate, freeing the mules so they could search the inky shadows inside. Death trap! Morton's

heart pounded in his throat. In another moment they would have him surrounded.

There was one alternative, a desperate chance, but he had to take it. Of a sudden Morton found life sweet. He didn't want to die. Strange, but thoughts of Marsha struck through his spinning mind. Gritting his teeth he reached for the tops of the poles in the corral. With a mighty swing he pulled himself up, hooking boot heels on the top. Then he was astride the fence.

The outlaws spotted him. Their pistols crashed above the rumble of the stampeding mules pouring out through the gate.

Morton struck the ground back of the corral running. Ahead lay a low shed. Off to one side a thicket of brush jutted from the snow. Like a hounded coyote, Morton made the brush, flattening himself on the ground as the outlaw killers rounded the corral.

"He's in the shed, boys!" one of them snarled. "Smoke him out!"

There were at least six of them. Fortified as they were with bottled courage, they charged the shed, their guns streaking flames. Morton lay still, his ears throbbing with the uproar. From the main log cabin came the furious bellow of Ferg Kendall, cursing his men, offering a thousand dollars for Rance Morton's life.

As the charging men reached the shed, Morton came to his feet. His only chance now lay in getting a horse. For in another hour or two it would be dawn and by then Kendall would have had every cabin in the village searched. Guards would be posted all along the rim of the valley.

Rance Morton plunged through the darkness around the corral. Chances were the searchers would never expect him to back-track. He reached the rear of the big cabin again without running into anyone. In front of the place were the saddled horses, but out there it was swarming with men who were searching the smaller cabins, their lanterns dotting the night like

fireflies, bobbing here and there.

A man appeared at the corner. Morton's blood turned to ice, but instead of running he trotted toward the man, tense for the roar of the searcher's pistol, the sickening sensation of lead smacking into his chest. But no shot came.

"Hey there!" the man called.

"It's Bill," said Morton. "They find him?"

The man lowered his gun. Curiously, he peered through the darkness as Morton came up. A startled curse broke from him, to die in a groan as Morton's gun-barrel slashed down. Then Morton was making a final spurt around the cabin toward the makeshift street.

THE HORSES, with trailing reins, stood in a shaft of light. There were men on the sheltered porch, taking orders from Kendall. The searchers back at the shed were scattering, and all along the night-gloomed street came the bobbing red lights of the lanterns.

Bent low, Morton reached the horses. In one flying leap he hit leather. The horse beneath him snorted and leaped off the ground. That quick bucking was all that saved Morton from instant death. On the porch, Kendall spotted him. With a roar he fired as Morton's horse took off in mighty leaps.

Something that felt like a white-hot poker struck Morton's left arm. Biting his lips against the pain, he hipped around, loosing the last of his loads at Ferg Kendall, but knew he was missing. Cursing bitterly, he clutched the kak horn as his fear-struck horse plunged on through the darkness.

It seemed that every outlaw in the valley had spotted him now. Frantically they were shooting. But like a black arrow, horse and rider swept on, unchecked.

"Stop him! He's gettin' away!"

Morton barely heard Kendall's fog-horn yell. It looked to Rance as if the night were alive with dancing red

lights. There were black shadows, too. White snow. The vague impression of black cabins sweeping past him. The whine of lead about his head. The terrible pain in his left arm and the feel of warm blood on his stiffened fingers.

He was almost out of pistol range when, remembering Marsha and Sully, his head jerked erect. Just ahead of him was Marsha's cabin, its windows yellow with light. From the shadows of the porch two figures suddenly came running toward him, their arms waving. One of them was shooting, not at Morton, but at the outlaws who had swung ahorse to take up the chase.

"Rance! Rance!"

That cry came to Morton like a scream slicing through thunder. Like a bolt of lightning it struck Morton. Sully and Marsha hadn't escaped! They had stayed here to face the inevitable end with him!

Through a swimming blur, Morton saw Marsha's pale face. Sully was beside her, whooping and shooting at the charging cavalcade behind Rance.

"Sully!" Morton yelled. "Damn you, I told you to leave!"

"Leave, son? I was willin', but Marsha bucked!"

Morton knew the oldster was lying. He knew it even as he kicked free of the stirrups and leaped to the ground. The racing animal tore on. Stumbling to his feet, Morton felt Marsha's arms about him, heard her crying his name. Then the three of them were dashing back inside the cabin.

They slammed the door, bolted it. Then Marsha had the lamps extinguished as Kendall and his killer bunch raced up and began shooting, circling the cabin like Apaches. In the darkness of the cabin, Morton could make out Sully at one of the windows, his crouched little figure limned against the lesser gloom of the night outside. Sully had a rifle to his shoulder and he was shooting, barking curses of defiance that were lost in the din.

Marsha reached Morton's side. Her

face seemed to swim toward him as if she were without a body. There was no fear in her stark eyes, only the look of a person who knows she is doomed to die and is willing to meet the end bravely. She had two pistols in her hands.

"Take them, Rance. I'll light a candle and reload."

He took them with his right hand. His left arm hung limp at his side. He felt Marsha's arms about his shoulders, was dimly conscious of her eyes clinging to his.

"I—I love you, Rance," she said, voice muffled by the firing. "I just want you to know, before the end."

She slipped quickly away.

GUNPOWDER fumes choked the front room where they were at bay. Bullets whammed through the smashed windows, thudded into the log walls. In one corner, Marsha McDowell knelt, reloading the guns. A candle burned on the floor in front of her. In its fluttery rays her fingers flew at the task.

At two opposite windows, Morton and Sully crouched, aiming and firing at the circling figures outside in the black night. Blood from a bullet gash in his forehead streaked Sully's bearded face. But unmindful of the flying lead he whooped and swore and killed!

"Come and get it, you sons of hell!" he bawled. "We're whuppin' 'em, Rance! Another down, squealin', with lead in his belly. It's gettin' gray in the east. They'll skulk fer cover come daylight!" His long-barreled Sharpes roared its emphasis.

During Morton's absence, Marsha had shown Sully where her father had secreted guns, powder and balls in a box beneath the plank floor. Now Sully and Rance were making use of those guns.

Powder grimed Morton's face like grease. In the dismal candlelight that face was a haggard mask. Pain racked his entire body, and a dull terrible drowsiness kept stealing over him. The blood-dripping fingers of his

left hand touched the floor. But he fought on.

X

GUNFIRE beat deafeningly into Morton's ears. He emptied one hot-barreled gun, grabbed up a second. Through a dancing haze in front of his eyes, he knew he was taking toll. Three times he had seen riders spill from their racing horses.

"Rance!"

He turned. Marsha had seen the blood on his left hand for the first time. "You're wounded, Rance!"

"Nothin' much, Marsha."

As he continued firing, she ripped up his sleeve, and bandaged the wound to stop the flow of blood. Her courageous fighting spirit stirred Morton with new strength. And in this awful moment when death was so close he suddenly realized that it was Marsha he loved—not Helen Stockton.

Marsha was the kind of girl he had dreamed of as his mate, a girl who would die fighting at his side if occasion demanded. He knew now that he had never loved Helen. He had only been blinded by her dazzling smile. Yet he had promised Helen he would return to her. If he lived, he would have to go back.

As Marsha took his two empty guns he saw the hopelessness in her eyes.

"We're done, Rance!" she cried. She handed him another pistol. "The last of the powder is in it, Rance."

Morton saw Sully crawling out of the shadows toward them. In his right hand he was gripping his bowie.

"I heard her, Rance!" he yelled. "Still got my old meat slicer and she don't need powder. When they come through the door—"

He stopped as Ferg Kendall's harsh voice roared above the din outside. Already black shadows were lifting from the snow-blanketed valley and dawn was at hand. A hundred yards off, in some brush, Ferg Kendall and some of his men lay hidden in a shal-

low arroyo. The riders had stopped circling.

"Morton!" Kendall yelled above the dwindling fire. "You hear me, Morton?"

"Sure I hear you, Kendall!"

"Got a proposition, Morton. Accept it and you go out of the valley hide-whole. Refuse and you go down from lead. Give us the girl. If you don't she'll be killed anyway. What's your answer?"

Morton laughed bitterly. "My answer is short, skunk-bait! Go to hell! We'll die fightin'!"

Through the shattered windows, Morton saw those crouched, charging figures swooping down upon them. Thunder of guns again echoed over the valley.

"Take the door, Sully!" Morton gritted fiercely. "As long as you can stand and fight for Marsha!"

The only way they could ever silence Sully was to kill him. Knife in hand, he faced the plank door, a hideous grin on his lips. In one corner, Marsha leaned weakly against the log wall, a rifle barrel gripped in her hands. Her face was white and her lips moved in prayer.

At one window, Morton stood half exposed. Lead nipped at his jacket, but he didn't flinch. Through a red blur he saw one group of killers within thirty feet of the cabin. Already some of them had reached the front door, were smashing at it with rifle-butts.

Then Morton was shooting. Two of the charging outlaws sprawled in the snow. One of the remaining men stood head and shoulders above the others. A brawny, bearded giant of a man, a gun in each hand. Ferg Kendall! Just as the attackers were about to plunge from view, Morton fired. He thought Kendall staggered and fell at the corner of the cabin. He could not be sure.

SULLY was yelling and Marsha was screaming, but the sounds came to Morton as if miles away. He tried to fight off the enveloping shadows, the

terrible weakness in his legs, but he felt himself sinking slowly, surely.

Suddenly Marsha was kneeling on the floor beside him, trying to tell him something.

"Rance!—Rance!" she cried. "They're coming!"

The outlaws she meant, of course. Yet she was acting strangely. Then above the firing outside lifted a mighty rumble like the beat of huge drums. Horses' hoofs! The front door was still intact! Sully was dancing up and down, swearing and laughing like a man suddenly gone out of his head.

"The soldiers, Rance!" Morton could barely make out what Sully was yelling. "By the leapin' fires of hell, the bluecoats have come!"

His cry seemed to echo. Dimly from outside came the startled, frenzied shouts of Kendall's men.

"The soldiers from Santa Fe!"

The beat of horses' hoofs swelled and carbines roared. Straight toward the center of the village the mounted soldiers rode, fifteen or more of them, downing the remaining Kendall men before they could grab horses and escape.

A red-headed Irish corporal in a great blue coat led the charge. He had ordered no prisoners to be taken.

About the last Morton remembered was Marsha bending over him sobbing: "We're safe, Rance! Safe!"

Even then, however, Morton knew that the coming of the soldiers meant little hope for him. Ferg Kendall and Galt Ricker were dead. With them had gone Morton's last hope of clearing his name of the wagon train robbery and killings.

It was daylight when Morton regained consciousness. Sunlight streamed into the cabin through the splintered windows. A roaring fire in the fireplace warmed the bullet-pocked room. The smell of cooking food was in the air, the smell of burnt powder was gone. From the kitchen came Sully's voice, in a none too tuneful version of "Susannah."

Morton thought it was all a continuation of the troubled dreams he

had been having. Marsha's face came out of a blur. Then the face of a man, whose presence made Morton forget the ache of his wound.

"Hub," he murmured incredulously.

Hub Stockton's fat face was flushed, his eyes beaming with joy. He and Marsha were kneeling on the floor beside the pallet where Morton lay.

"It's me, son—alive an' kickin'. The seat of my britches is wore thin from the ride, but when the Rangers said—"

"Rangers?" Bewildered, Morton sat up. "What about the soldiers from Santa Fe? Kendall? Ricker?"

"Kendall and Ricker are dead, son," Hub Stockton said grimly. "The other lobos are wiped out, too. The soldiers left an hour ago with the bodies. You got both Kendall and Ricker, who were responsible for Tag's death. But before Ricker died he confessed to everything, clearin' your name."

There were a lot of things Hub Stockton explained during the next few minutes. Suspecting Galt Ricker's crookedness, Stockton and a couple of Rangers had trailed him two nights before. They had arrived in Hideout Valley shortly after the soldiers.

"I never believed for a minute that you killed the guards and robbed the wagons, Rance. Ricker claimin' you done it was what first made me suspicious of him. Those wanted posters of you, and the reward? Ricker wanted to make things look right. It was the money he got from that freight goods—*my own goods*—that he used to buy me out of the freight business."

HUB STOCKTON introduced Morton to the two Texas Rangers who came into the room.

"McNally's men, Rance," Stockton said. "Guess now that the job is done we'll be ridin' back toward Franklin tonight." He paused. "Just wonderin' if you're goin' back, too."

Morton felt Marsha's eyes upon him. And it was an odd look Stockton gave him. The oldest seemed to want to tell Morton something more.

"I'll be goin' back with you, Hub,"

Morton said quietly.

Stockton joined the other men in the kitchen, leaving Morton and Marsha McDowell alone.

"I've got to go back, Marsha," Morton said. "I've never told you before. But there's a girl back there, Stockton's niece—"

"Helen?" asked Marsha softly.

"Sully told you?"

"No. Mr. Stockton did while you were sleeping."

Late in the afternoon, Tonca, Marsha's loyal Indian woman, rode into the valley. Stoically she took her place as servant in the cabin as though nothing had happened.

It was the middle of the afternoon before Stockton and the Rangers were ready to ride. Morton, his left arm in a sling, drew on his fur coat. Rest and warm food had restored his strength, but it was with an ache in his throat that he was leaving. Marsha had avoided him since morning. Now, preparing to leave, he looked up and saw her in the kitchen doorway. The others were all outside.

She came up to him. She could smile a little, but couldn't hold back the tears. When she offered her hand, he took it. His heart was too full for words. More than anything else in the world he wanted to take her into his arms and tell her he loved her. Now that his name was clear they could have lived happily here in Hideout Valley. It was wonderful ranching country, a valley such as Morton had always hoped to find.

"Good-by, Rance," Marsha whispered.

"You goin' to live here now, Marsha?"

"Yes, Rance," she murmured. "It is home to me. I love this valley."

She stopped. And Morton looked up to see Sully in the kitchen doorway, a sad little smile upon his lips.

"I do, too, Rance," he grunted. "Think I'll stay. See, by gunnie. Marsha and Tonca need a man about. And what do you want me to do with them cows of yours out back?"

"They're yours, Marsha," Morton

told her. Quickly he went outside and mounted.

The two Rangers, Hub Stockton and Morton rode through the deserted log village. Just before climbing the timbered slope at the far end of the valley, Morton looked back. Marsha, Sully and the Indian woman were standing on the front porch of the cabin. Morton waved to them and Marsha and Sully lifted their arms in farewell.

When Morton turned he saw Stockton's pale eyes upon him.

"You don't need to go back, Rance."

"I made a promise, Hub."

They rode on in silence....

The first night they camped in a timbered shelter. The second day they were out of the snow country, deep in the sandy wastes near Franklin.

Hub Stockton said little, but worry clouded his eyes. At times Morton was certain the oldster wanted to tell him something, but when he got ready to speak he would always stop.

Morton was even more perplexed when they reached Franklin. Leaving the two Rangers, Stockton said:

"Let's ride to my house, Rance. We can talk there."

THEY FOUND Hub Stockton's sprawled 'dobe home deserted. Helen was gone. There was a note lying on the table in the front room. Slowly, painfully, Stockton read:

Dear Uncle Hub:

I am taking the stage to St. Louis, leaving this country forever. Don't worry about me, for I'm not worth it. If you ever see Rance Morton alive, try to explain to him what a fool I've been, and may God forgive me.

Galt Ricker and I were secretly married shortly after Rance left. I didn't know until it was too late what a scoundrel Galt was. Word came today that he was killed. Being his wife and heir, the freight line he tricked you out of falls to me. I now leave it to you, the rightful owner, and in doing this I hope to justify things a little.

Helen

It was several moments before ei-

ther man spoke. There was a mist in Stockton's pale eyes, a tired smile on his lips as he studied Morton before he got up his courage to speak.

"I suspected all this, Rance," he said at last huskily. "Somethin' told me she was gettin' ready to run away, but I couldn't make myself tell you. I want to shake your hand, son. As the Mexes say, *vaya con Dios* on your trip back to the valley."

Rance Morton gripped the old man's hand. There was no further need for words. Morton left almost immediately on the trail back to Hide-out Valley. Somehow he rode a little straighter, and there was a different look in his eyes. The look of happiness a man finds when he lives like a *man!*

He rode into the valley just at sunset. Smoke rolled up from the chimney of Marsha's cabin. On some far off knoll a buffalo wolf bayed to the closing day.

Marsha heard Morton ride up. She came running out the front door of the cabin, crying and laughing as a girl sometimes will. Morton slipped from his horse and lifted her off the ground with his right arm. The light of love was in their eyes.

"Rance!" she cried softly. "You've come back."

Words were such futile things. Morton said: "Forever, Marsha, forever."

Their lips met and held. And they weren't aware of Sully sitting on the front porch watching them, grinning, until he coughed.

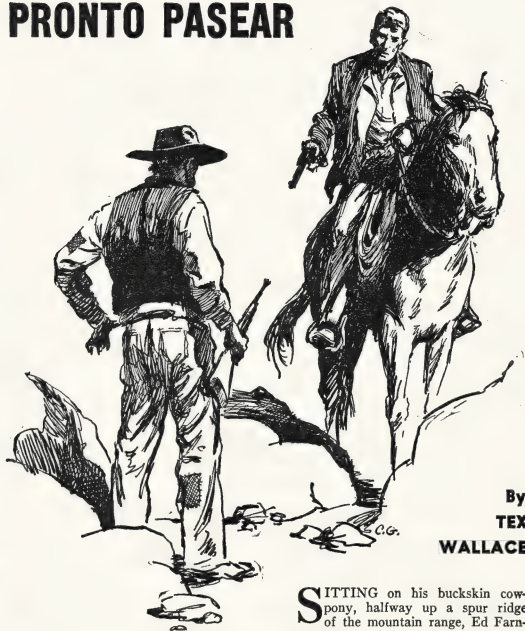
"Knewed you'd come back, Rance," he said, "but I didn't look for you till tonight."

"How'd you know, Sully?" Morton asked, and laughed shakily.

"By gunnie!" snorted Sully. "Maybe I only got one eye, but I ain't blind. That's why I stayed. I didn't want that long ride for nothin'. Come mornin' we'll ride into Santa Fe. I need a jug and it looks like you two need a damned good parson."

And they did.

PRONTO PASEAR



By
TEX
WALLACE

Farnham's goal

wasn't gold or glory —

but he needed a good deed

SITTING on his buckskin cowpony, halfway up a spur ridge of the mountain range, Ed Farnham took a medium telescope from one of his saddle-bags and put the small end to his right eye. He adjusted it and quietly ranged its vision down the long valley below him to his left. A mile and a half. Two miles, maybe, then.

He kept the glass focused for more

than a minute, and was rewarded. Rewarded wasn't quite the word to fit the fact, of course. Not from Farnham's viewpoint.

It was a posse, all right. It had the steadily intent look of one. Probably led by that redheaded tick-bitten deputy sheriff who'd always been a sort of servant of the now deceased, Franklyn H. Merton.

"I sure hate to make a stand and fight it out with 'em," Farnham muttered to the cowpony. "There's probably some honest fools in that posse. It'd be mighty near as painful to shoot them as to let them shoot me."

Farnham turned his mount upward over the heavily timbered ridge, went down the other side, traversed the lushly green valley on the other side and headed up the side of the main range of mountains. The slope was very gradual and for this fact Farnham was grateful.

Twenty minutes or so before the buckskin had picked up a sharp stone in its left forefoot. Farnham had sensed it at once and had removed the stone. But the buckskin was limping a little and it would be limping worse as time went by. It was for this reason Farnham had decided to take to the high country: if he had to make a stand of it, much better to make it from up above looking down. No posse could charge uphill or sneak uphill in the dark without making a great deal of noise.

Yes, one man was as twenty men for purposes of defense if he was well barricaded away up on a tolerably steep slope. This one would become steeper the higher he went. It was well wooded almost to the summit with scrub pine and spruce. Getting Ed Farnham would take some doing, as long as his belly and his ammunition held out.

CERTAINLY he had no intention of being captured and lynched. True, he'd killed a man, but it had been unintentional even though that man had had it coming. Lean chance there'd ever be to *prove* it had been

unintentional. He laughed mirthlessly, almost silently.

About halfway up the mountain, Farnham's buckskin stepped onto a well-worn deer trail. The ex-sodbuster turned his mount along it southward.

Half an hour later Farnham reined in abruptly. Ahead of him was a sizable clearing, part of it made flat by nature and a trickle of splendidly clear water that tumbled from some obscure lake far up on the mountain, and part of it made flat by the hand of man.

The man in this case was a prospector who hadn't bothered to shave (sensibly enough) for several weeks and who, more important, carried a .30-30 in the crook of his arm. He wasn't exactly pointing it at Farnham, but he wasn't exactly *not* pointing it, either.

"Travelin' or sightseein'?" the prospector inquired.

"Travelin'," said Farnham.

"Don't let me stop you."

"Don't intend to," Farnham said. The .45 snaked out of his holster much faster than anyone would have expected of a sodbuster. "Drop that buffalo tickler, *amigo*. Makes me nervous, like."

The prospector hesitated only an instant. Then he dropped the rifle. He sighed in mock despair. "Goes to show you can't always tell from the kind of pants they wear," he stated. "Next time, if there is a next time, I'll focus old Elizabeth right at the galoot's wishbone." He squinted at the sodbuster. "What's your goal in life—gold or glory?"

"Neither," Farnham stated.

"I ain't got much of either," said the prospector.

"I'm in a tight haul," Farnham said, holding the .45 steady, "and I could use a good deed from you. Enforced, if necessary."

"Such as?"

"I might as well tell you."

"Do that." The old prospector squinted at him again. "You're dressed like a sodbuster, but you don't hoist that Colt like one. How

do you explain that?"

"Prodded cows in Oklahoma and Texas, where skunkaroos are a dime for thirteen and it's handy to know where your gun-butt hangs. Any more questions?"

"One. You got a honest-appearin' face and—"

"And intentions to match, maybe," Farnham said. "You see what they got me."

"Nope. I don't see."

"You will. A posse."

"Mind statin' why?"

"No, I don't mind. There's a fat coyote of a banker lying on the floor of his bank in Hongo town. The skunk scent he used for blood is all over the floor and the horse apple he used for a heart isn't throbbin' any more."

"Why'd you shoot him? Foreclose a mortgage?"

"He foreclosed a mortgage, sure enough. But I didn't shoot him. It merely looks as if I did, which is the same thing—only worse."

"How come you didn't shoot him?"

"Didn't want to. He shot himself."

"Franklyn H. Merton shot himself?" The prospector looked quite incredulous about this.

FARNHAM smiled wryly. "It was thisaway: Couple years ago I figured there wasn't anything but rheumatism and stiff legs in bein' a forty-a-month cowpuncher the rest of my life. If I could start a little spread of my own I could at least have fresh steak and garden greens when I wanted 'em, and sleep late till seven in the mornin'. So I got me a hundred-and-sixty-acre homestead and borrowed a couple thousand on it and like to busted my back with a grub-hoe for a whole year. Year and a half. Put in a crop last spring and got four breedin' cows." He looked up at the cloudless sky and laughed mirthlessly. "You know what happened. Driest year in the past fifty-six. Drier than the inside of a parson's neck. Crops burned up. Not even greens to eat. Breedin' cows were so thin they

could hardly stand up."

The prospector nodded in silent sympathy and pointed up at the trickle of waterfall. "That thing used to flow enough to float a brindle bull each minute. Right now you got time to scratch fleas while you're fillin' a thimble."

Farnham smiled, a little pale around the gills. "Plain enough."

"So Franklyn H. foreclosed?"

"Sure enough. Why not? Those damned-fool senators up at the capitol got ory-eyed last session and ignorantly and generously voted to build an irrigation canal down through these parts from Buffalo Lake, thirty miles odd up north." Farnham cocked an ear, looked as far as he could down the trail behind him.

"Well, now." The prospector rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

Farnham faced him again. "My mortgage was due today. But with irrigatin' water down through here a year from now, my spread'll be worth seven or eight times what he lent me. Easy."

"So he foreclosed?"

"Sure enough."

"You still ain't told me how come he shot himself."

"Well," said Farnham, "when he foreclosed I figured I ought to leave him somethin' to remember me by. A little somethin'. Like my palm print alongside his tomcat jowls."

"So?"

"Never fear a brave galoot even if he's your enemy," Farnham said, "and never trust a yellow-bellied son of a coyote even if he's seemed to be your friend. I sort of strolled toward Franklyn H. with this goin' away present in mind. He got nervous and pulled a Derringer on me. I kept walkin', because I figured it takes guts to shoot a man and he didn't qualify. He fooled me. He did qualify—but not till I'd grabbed his wrist. Could I help it if he got stampeded inside himself and the muzzle happened to be pointin' at his gizzard? He pulled the trigger, not me."

The prospector rubbed his chin

again. "I see. Franklyn H. always was a case ace. Five to the deck. Well, now."

Farnham cocked his ear again. Somewhere down the trail there was the faint *ping!* of a horseshoe on rock. A mile; maybe less.

"All right, then," Farnham said, facing the old prospector again. "Could be you don't believe me. I sure can't prove it. I wouldn't have time even if I could. My cayuse is lame. It might carry me three or four miles farther. But I can't run for it on him. They'd catch me. You got a burro?"

"Nope. Got two packhorses. Staked back in the pines."

"Swaybacked and potbellied?"

"Some. Hanker for one?"

The two looked at each other.

Presently Farnham dismounted and led his mount forward. He said: "I hanker for one, but not quite a swap, I'm put out to tell you. I can't outrun a posse on a potbellied packhorse. But—"

"Posse'll be here in ten or fifteen minutes," the prospector said.

Farnham said: "Likely. That mangy redheaded deputy couldn't track a drunk duck through a flour barrel, but there'll be trackers in the posse. I've made all this palaver because I've had time and because you look like a right old galoot—and I've wanted you to know why I have to do what I'm goin' to do. I don't *want* to have to do it, but a poke in my kind of quicksand can't trust strangers."

"I savvy."

Keeping an eye on the prospector, Farnham knelt and plucked some quite prickly mountain thistles.

The prospector stared at him.

"This now," said Ed Farnham calmly, "is what I aim to do...."

THE REDHEADED deputy looked suitably officious and mean, as only the mean and stupid can look, and wore his authority with full knowledge that the sheriff, who was dull and knot-headed but honest, was thoroughly bedridden with a broken leg. The deputy glared at the old

prospector and said:

"That damn' killer was by here! We tracked him!"

The prospector arose from the ground and rubbed the slight bruise on his head. He stared at the posse groggily and pointed at his head. "Here's another track. And if you expect me to say he went thataway"—he pointed south—"that's exactly the way he went, sheriff, mister, sir!"

"Hmph." The deputy looked at him authoritatively.

There were twelve men in the posse.

Two of them, the trackers, peered around at the mess of hoofprints on the ground. Several others, who had faces only a mother gila monster could love, prowled around the camp suspiciously. They even went into the old prospector's tent, kicking the bed-roll on the way in. One of the trackers yelled: "He did go south, sure enough! On the run, at that."

The old prospector looked at the deputy and said: "Be careful about catchin' up with him. It's worse than missin' 'em sometimes. By the way, he said he was innocent and he had a ring of truth about him. Said the late banker Merton shot his ownself."

"Shot himself! You're loco!" the deputy rasped.

"Maybe the coroner and the Hon-go gunsmith will find out it's true," said the prospector. "Where was the Derringer found?"

"In Merton's hand! That Farnham put it there to make it look like suicide. Merton never'd killed himself."

"Not meaning to, no. Why argue?"

The dismounted members of the posse got back onto their horses and they headed southward along the deer trail, some of them lagging noticeably and pondering over what the old man had said.

For minutes the old prospector stood there in the clearing staring down the trail and listening to their receding hoofbeats. Presently he grinned and turned around and said toward his tent:

"Lower your sights, rannihan. I'll loose you out, pronto."

FARNHAM sprang to a crouch, wary and alert, as the old man unwrapped the bedroll from around him. He'd had the roll arranged so he could look out without being seen, and he had his .45 in his right hand throughout and the old man's rifle beside him. "I'll go get you my best packhorse," the prospector said.

Farnham looked regretfully south down the trail. "I sure hated to put those thistles under my buckskin's saddle blanket. But he took off for home like he meant it. Without my weight on him he ought to be nearly there by now—and they can track him all the way. To my ex-spread. Twelve or thirteen miles."

"By the time they suspicion what went on," the prospector said, "you'll be ten miles north of here. Twenty-three miles between you and that posse. You can get a fresh horse and head top speed for wherever you're going. They'll never catch you."

"South Texas," said Farnham, "where the mangy palm trees scratch the cattle and the breeze blows warm all winter long. I wasn't meant to be a sodbuster anyway."

They went and got the packhorse and brought it out and saddled it. Farnham mounted the spavined brute and said:

"I'm not a horse-thief by nature, but in a tight haul from a stacked deck you can't be a choirboy and stay alive. Much obliged. I'll drop your rifle half a mile up the trail. Well—"

The prospector strode forward, grinning, and handed a small buckskin poke up toward Farnham. "Just in case you get hungry."

"What's that?" Farnham stared.

"Dust. Gold dust. There's something I forgot to tell you: Franklyn H. Merton grubstaked me to this pasear."

"What?" Farnham blinked.

"Yep. You see, this mountain was always figured spooked by the Injuns and by some white prospectors,

too. Some Injuns died on it, a long while ago. Got sick and died. Likely smallpox or pneumonia, but they figured it was cursed. A few prospectors, like me, tried for gold on it, mostly in the creek from this waterfall. Nothing in the creek. Well, this summer when it got so dry, I decided to look around. There was a half-breed Injun showed up in town about six months ago with some high-assay stuff. He showed it to Merton, I found out. Later that Injun wound up dead out in the desert, all beat up."

"Wouldn't tell exactly where he found it?"

"I reckon not. I reckon Franklyn H. hired somebody to persuade him to tell exactly—and somebody accidentally beat the Injun to death while trying. I was down on my heels, so Merton grub-staked me."

"Plain enough. You found some."

"Not ten rods from this camp," said the prospector. "A ledge. Where nobody but that half-breed ever looked before. It's no Virginia City, but it'll keep me in whiskey and spangles in Santa Fe the rest of my time."

"Nice to hear that," said Farnham.

"Good luck." He started to leave.

"Hold it, stranger! I haven't told you the payoff. I think Franklyn H. Merton died just as you said."

Franklyn H. *had* died that way. Farnham didn't feel like further reassurance on this point. He nodded.

"Well," said the prospector, "when Franklyn H. sent me up here he knew I was going to find that Injun's ledge sooner or later. It's a big mountain, but I was bound to find it. So he signed an agreement with me."

"Like what?"

"Well, it says whichever one of us dies first turns over all his mineral rights to the other one. All notarized. I was figured to die first, the way that half-breed did. . . . You ain't no hoss-thief, stranger! You're welcome!"

They looked at each other. They grinned wryly. "So long, *amigo*," said the prospector.

"*Adios, amigo*," said Farnham, the ex-sodbuster.

COW CONDUCTOR

A Novel by **BARRY SCOBEE**



I

DAVE ALLEN bossed a work-train on lumpy steel as the railroad was built into the vast and empty cow country of the Southwest. Then he was put to nursing a freight train as towns were born along the line. One of the towns was named partly for him and partly for two construction engineers, Moore and Landers. The synthetic designation was Almorland. It made Dave feel as if he had been built into the sunny, solemn land.

When the first passenger train hop-pity-skipped over the finished road Dave Allen was the conductor on the last division. And it was his last trip

as a crewman, because he had heard so much talk of cattle and opportunity, and he had come to love the country so intensely, that he had decided to quit railroading and invest his savings in a herd. Lose it all in one gulp or be his own free and independent boss as a cattle king—that was his ambition.

It was October when as a deadhead passenger Dave left the train at his own Almorland, "fifty, footloose, and fancy-free," still wearing his blue conductor pants and cap with CONDUCTOR above the visor in gold braid lettering. He hadn't cared to

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*It's a fight all the way up the long trail to the shipping point
when Dave Allen combats raiders to save his depleted herd*



waste money in the purchase of a hat.

He felt rather alone for nobody greeted him here. The one rambling street carried only strangers—the rail and camp followers who had started the place as a tent town and moved on. Dave felt so good that he sort of pitied these people who didn't know that he was knit into the town's very name.

As he breakfasted on ham and grid-dle cakes at a dollar a toss, in a smoky restaurant, two men came in and legged up on the high stools alongside him at the counter. They reeked of cattle from boots to Stetsons. One greeted Dave noisily.

"Hi, railroad! A sailor without a sea, a cowboy without a cow, and conductor without a train. Ha-ha-ha!"

DAVE LIFTED off his cap and tapped it against his elbow, his gesture for removing dust or hot cinders.

"Maybe I ought to quit wearing this," he said. "I'm through with engine toots and brake squeals and am thinking of investing in cattle bawls."

"You ain't!" cried the hearty big man, sliding from his stool and sticking out his hand. "My name's Pickenpaugh. Pick for short. Huh, Allen? Glad to meet you, Mr. Allen. Meet this here, my foreman, Ed Creasey. Listen, Conductor, I got exactly what you want, right at the edge of town."

"How'd you know what I want?"

"You see, I'm a buyer. I ain't no shipper. I gather 'em up for my little profit and let the other feller take 'em to the railroad, Fort Worth or K. C. for his big profit."

"Rushing the season, aren't you, Mr. Pickenpaugh?" Dave inquired mildly. "No cattle's been shipped yet over the new steel. There's not even any loading pens here yet."

"Yep, but there's a hundred bunches bein' made up right now, I bet you, for the drive to them new pens on a hundred miles—what do you call 'em—Monaduke's. I got two hundred head of prime stuff all ready to start the drive. Beef that'll make your

pocketbook yearn to buy 'em. How big are you starting out on?"

Allen grinned at him. "Many as my money will buy. What you asking for these prime beefsteaks of yours?"

"Twenty wagonwheels per head. Practically givin' 'em away. But I'm anxious to get back south and pick up more—Pick and Paugh, that's me. Let's go."

"I haven't any horse yet."

"You can ride Ed's. He don't need to go." Then outside the restaurant: "You got the cash? I can't fool with checks. Need the hard stuff to buy with from the little fellers back inland. Here's Ed's horse. Can you get up?"

About four miles beyond the town Pickenpaugh's herd was being held along a drywash near meager water-pools left from the September rains. The stuff was in keeping with what Dave had observed in West Texas and New Mexico country in the course of the railroad building. It was all leggy stuff, mixed, black and white and red and other colors; highhorned Mexican cattle, and quarter-blood Durhams, stuff made for Eastern consumption. There were several different brands on the animals but Dave didn't notice that.

"How much?" he asked.

"Twenty per head. Four thousand dollars for the whole bunch, and cheap at half-twice the price."

"When could you make delivery?"

Dave had heard cowmen ask that.

"Well," Pickenpaugh pulled out a bull-sluggier watch, "it's a quarter to eight. We ought to be through by eight."

"But I've got no horses, no cowboys," protested Dave. "No chuck-wagon."

"You can buy 'em in town."

"How about buying yours?"

"Add five hundred dollars and you can have my wagon, three saddles, eight hosses, and three cowboys throwed in. Hey, Jock!" he called. A man came away from the chuck-wagon on foot. "Mr. Allen, this is Jock Taylor, a top cowman who can

get your drive to water every night ahead of all other drives to Monaduke's pens. Jock knows the country like he knows a pack of cards—his fingers, I mean."

Dave thought he saw a wink pass between the two men, but he did not heed it.

"I'll want a count," said Dave. "I'm not paying for two hundred head if they're not there."

"We just counted 'em yesterday."

"Count 'em today."

"All right, Mr. Conductor, all right. I sure want a satisfied customer."

JOCK TAYLOR and the other two men strung the bunch out, drifting them in a thin thread between Pickenpaugh and Dave.

"Hundred ninety-six," said Dave, as the last animal went through.

"Right," said Pickenpaugh, looking slightly beat. "Same dang cow thief must have snatched four head in the night. You want to pay me the money now?"

"Yes, I'll take 'em," said Dave. "At eight dollars a head."

"Eight!" Pickenpaugh almost jerked out of his saddle. "You crazy?"

"Nope," Dave wore glasses. He peered over them and smiled benignly. "And my name ain't Sucker either. I know about prices. I'd be lucky to pull down twelve dollars a head for this stuff in Fort Worth."

"But eight—my gosh, man, be reasonable."

"I am."

"Good-by. I'm going to town."

"So am I, Pick."

"But listen," Pickenpaugh's big windy manner was all shot. "Dang it, talk business," he rumbled sourly.

It ended by Dave getting the cattle for ten dollars a head, with two hundred added for the wagon, three saddles, and eight horses that looked as if they recently had done some long, hard traveling. The horses had various brands, too, but Dave was satisfied; he was a cowman at last. A fat wallet got lean quickly as he counted out twenty-two hundred dol-

lars. Pickenpaugh snatched the money with a grunt and rode off.

"Come to town for your pay, Jock," he called back to Taylor.

With the big rider gone, Taylor sauntered over to Dave, taking in the cap, the still-creased pants, and the dusty, polished shoes. Taylor smiled.

"All righty, Mr. Conductor, I'm your man now," he said. "Got any train orders?"

"There'll be plenty," said Dave, looking over his glasses again, but not benignly now. "And the name is Mr. Allen."

Dave's short figure and dry voice had settled the hash of many a brakeman and wild shovel wielder on railroad construction. It settled Taylor's now, outwardly anyhow.

"Yessir," he said, taken aback. "But I suggest we don't start the drive today. Can't get to water by sundown now and we're short on stuff to eat."

Dave nodded, and asked if the other two riders had wages coming. They did, so he sent them to town to collect from Pickenpaugh. In the afternoon he and Taylor drove the chuckwagon in and bought supplies. He lost Taylor for a while, and found him in a pine-bar saloon in a huddle with Pickenpaugh and Ed Creasey. They broke up at once and Taylor said he was ready.

"Get everything fixed up with Pick?" Dave asked.

Odd expressions crossed three faces, and Taylor said:

"I got my pay, all right. Sure."

Back at camp Dave worked on saddles, and the wagon. He was used to patching up work cars, and he'd watched the engine crew make repairs. By sundown he had his new outfit in shape for the long drive, including a Mexican cook and a Mexican cowboy with silver conchos and a knife in his shirt.

Dave tapped his cap on his elbow.

"We'll be highballing out of here at daylight," he said to Jock Taylor. "The railroad will haul the first shipment of cattle out of Monaduke's pens for nothing." Dave's arm pressed the

lean wallet in his coat pocket. "I hope we can be first."

"Yessir, Mr. Allen."

The next day they struck their watering place well before dark—a string of rainwater pools in a wide arroyo. They had covered fifteen or sixteen miles, Jock Taylor said, and called it a good day's drive.

Dave was more than satisfied, except about one thing.

"These waterholes," he said. "They're going to be dried up, in this warm October weather. Do we have to depend on them all the way?"

"Nope. We'll hit a couple of owned wells, and a lake. And I know of one live creek."

THEY HIT more old rainwater the next day. It was early in the afternoon. Taylor set in to make camp. Dave protested that they would lose at least four more hours of driving.

"But it'll be maybe a dry camp," Taylor countered. "Only chance for water a-tall is a shaller lake six seven miles on. If it's dried up the herd won't drink till we hit Mason's wells tomorrow night."

"The shallow lake won't be dry if these steers have been living the right kind of life," Dave said good-humoredly. "We'll keep moving."

"But, Mr. Allen!" Taylor's eyes had gone cloudy. They scanned the back trail moodily. "I sure suggest we stay here."

"Keep 'em traveling," said Dave in that dry, dry way.

Taylor suffered another shock.

"Yessir," he said.

When they had grazed the herd along for a mile or so, Taylor said he'd left his coat back there. He rode off to get it. Looking back, Dave saw the man staying in one spot. Dave got his old leather railroading grip from the wagon, and drew out a spyglass. He rested the glass across a wheel. At last Taylor got back on his horse and Dave could see what looked like a stick stuck up in the ground with a scrap of paper fluttering at the end. He replaced the glass thoughtfully.

When Taylor caught up, Dave spoke in dry tones.

"Who'd you leave the message for, Jock?"

"Huh?" Taylor swallowed jerkily. "Oh, that. Why, I wrote if anybody found a cowhide jacket with red and white hair it's mine." He rode on for a short way, very-much puzzled. "You sure got good eyes, Mr. Allen."

Dave said nothing of the spyglass. Oddly enough, when they camped that night the Mexican cook tossed the red and white cowhide jacket out of the chuckwagon.

Oddly enough, too, the "shallor" lake was noways near dry. The steers had another drink to round out another good long drive toward Monaduke's and the free ride—if they were first—to market.

Still more queer, and disconcerting, was the thing that happened that night.

To do his part with the men, even if he was the boss, Dave saddled a fresh horse and took the dark to eleven o'clock watch on the herd. He was eager to learn the ways of cattle. The Mexican rider, Cruz Aguilar, went on at eleven. Dave was drowsily awake when the guard changed at two, but awake enough to wonder why Jock Taylor was sending out two men for the rest of the night for all was quiet.

Dave peeped out from his new bedroll. The moon was bright. The two guards riding off had to be, and were, the two original riders that Pickenpaugh had let him have along with Taylor. Why was Taylor up now, anyhow? It was Cruz's job to awaken the man or men to relieve him.

Dave had just dozed off again when a volley of shots jerked him upright. Shots mingled at once with a heaving sort of sound that he had never heard before. But he knew what it was. He could see. A herd of cattle rising together from bedground. And leaving. A stampede!

Out of his bed in his longhanded underwear, Dave saw his two riders, one on either side of the pounding cattle. He couldn't tell whether they

were trying to get ahead and stop the run. Two men were racing behind, and they kept firing revolvers.

Jock Taylor was just sort of running around. The old cook came out from under the wagon with some sort of old blunderbuss that he called a shotgun. If Taylor had a gun in his warbag he'd never displayed it. Dave had a .38 in his grip, but what good was it in this emergency? All that Cruz had was a knife. Jock Taylor came running up, cursing.

"Blast their souls, they got our horses too! Danged thieves!"

The horse bunch had been in a rope pen between the camp and the herd. The only horse left was the one Aguilar had been riding. He had brought it up to pull off the saddle. Taylor reached for its reins.

"I'll take this horse and ride after the stuff," he yelled.

"No," Dave was very flat. "It's Aguilar's own horse. He'll go." He practically thumbed the eager Mexican into the saddle.

"Forget the cattle for the time being, boy," he ordered. "Try to get back our horses. Or some of them."

II

GLUMPLY Dave, Taylor and the *cusinero* fiddled around the rest of the night. Taylor wandered here and there, avoiding the boss. Or at least Dave wondered if he did. Had the man been mixed up in running the herd off?

After a time Dave directed the cook to build up a fire for a guide light. But as it turned out the beacon wasn't needed. For it was after daylight when Aguilar came herding in the whole horse bunch.

"These horse, they just pullin' grass," he explained. "I miss them first time. Those t'ieves, they don't try keep our horse, look lak. Them cow, they go east, purty soon they bend." He illustrated with an elbow.

"Turned north, eh?" mused Dave. "Well, that's our way, if we can overtake 'em. They turned our horses

loose, huh?" Which was another square in the puzzle.

It was nine o'clock in the morning before they found the herd. It was scattered out, grazing contentedly. The two American cowhands were casually on watch, turning back a stray now and then. Dave rode up to one of them.

"What happened?" he asked.

The man shrugged. "I'd just got on the far side of the bunch when the shootin' opened."

"How many did that shooting?"

"Two, three. I dunno. A feller's kind of dopey at two a.m. And I never did go back to interduce myself. Thought maybe they wouldn't like me."

Dave was certain he could detect a faint jeering note in the man's talk.

"Where were the horses when you went on guard?"

"Right in the rope corral, where I saddled this pony."

"How far did those fellows chase the herd?" Dave pushed on.

"Maybe four miles. They kept holdin' the horse bunch on the tail of the steers. A while after Pete and me got the herd turned north, the horses peeled off and the men went after them. We thought they were just after horses. I see you got them all back."

"Why didn't you stop and wait for us?"

"Well, the stuff was kind of spooky. They wouldn't have bedded down soon. They was leggin' it in the right direction, north. So Pete and me we just shoved 'em along, makin' miles. Must've come five miles since the gun-shooters left us. Nothin' out of shape with that idea, was they?"

Dave thought he heard the undertone of insolence again. The other rider told the same story. It sounded too nearly the same, as if they had got their heads together on it. But there was nothing open to complain about. No doubt they had done right in keeping the bunch on the move "in the cool of the morning," as the other man said.

But when the scattered drive was closed up and on the move again Dave saw that something had happened. The herd was larger than it had been. He studied that, and began to make out fat three-year-old cow-stuff with Durham colorings. He couldn't remember seeing such animals in the herd. He was about to ask Jock Taylor about it, then decided to keep his half-knowledge to himself. Could it be he was wrong about the additions? No, he wasn't wrong.

He learned definitely what was wrong about four o'clock that afternoon....

The herd was moving along slowly at a grazing pace, gobbling the luxuriant curing autumn grass. Dave was jogging along on his horse beside the lumbering, noisy chuckwagon, saddle-drowsy in the October heat. Suddenly his horse looked around with pointing ears. Against the glare of the westering sun Dave saw two riders coming at a straight, hard lope. He veered about and waited.

"Hi!" one of the men greeted him, hard and questioning, as they pulled up. He was long and lean and his steel-gray eyes were squinted slits. But for an instant, as he took in Dave's conductor cap, there was a glint of amusement. "This your outfit?" he asked. "You the boss?"

"Yes."

"I want to look over your stuff."

"Why?"

"For stolen heifers."

DAVE LOOKED around over his shoulder. The old Mexican cook was at the wagon with his "shootgun" in his brown fist. Jock Taylor was trotting up.

"We haven't stolen anybody's heifers," Dave said.

"I ain't saying you have. But listen, Mr. Conductor. I was the owner of fifty herd of spayed three-year-old heifers, or cows—they'd never had calves—good fat stuff with Durham blood. Night before last thieves stampered us and drove off my two years'

work, and the horses with 'em. Those fifty head ain't being moved to the new railroad by themselves—they'd be too easy to see. They've been choused into some bigger bunch to hide 'em. I aim to have a look-see at yours."

Maybe if the young fellow hadn't been so brittle, or the day so hot, or Dave so drowsy-tired he wouldn't have said what popped out now.

"Not without my consent you won't."

"With or without, I'm seein'!" said Steel-Eyes, and in one quick flicker his gun was in his fist, sticking out at Dave's midriff, and close.

Dave could hear the cook and Taylor coming behind him.

If I let this long whickerbill get away with this gunplay, he thought, I'm a ruined conductor. They'll steal my herd and like as not murder me. Well, he'd disarmed more than one scrapping, cantankerous hoodlum in the railroad construction crews. He went into swift action.

His stubby left hand shot out quicker than Steel-Eyes' mind and muscle could react. His thick fingers gripped the barrel. At the same time he leaned from the saddle. His right forearm struck inside Steel-Eyes' right elbow. The gun tilted upward. It fired. The horses jumped apart. Cowboy and conductor were dragged off. Dave's leverage against Steel-Eyes' hand and wrist was bone-breaking. No hand could hold to a gun. It came away as they hit the ground.

Dave flung the gun aside. He got up, dusting grass-seed from the knees of his blue pants. The cowboy was up like a panther. Dave expected an attack. But the man gave back a step. His wide mouth flicked a wiry grin, which was instantly gone.

"You're good, Mr. Conductor," he said.

Dave, slightly at a loss in the face of unexpected good-nature, lifted his cap, tapped it against his elbow. Then he picked up the gun, by the barrel, and handed it butt-first to the owner.

"You can look at my cattle now,"

he said. "Your stolen stuff is there."

As they rode along the string Dave told the young fellow about the raid on his own drive the night before.

"Looks like what they were doing was getting 'em a bigger herd to drive yours into," he surmised. "They're probably figuring to take the whole train between here and Monaduke's."

"Plenty of herds moving that way makes plenty of cow-thieves," said Steel-Eyes. "My name's Pat Gurnsey. Reckon you aim to water tonight at Mason's wells. Men'll be there that know me, and that these spayed heifers are mine. I'll wait till then to cut them out."

"Fair enough," said Dave, and peered benignly over his spectacles at Pat Gurnsey.

He was thinking, Durn your scrappy hide! If you're telling the truth you'd make a good young partner for an ex-conductor about my size and weight. He said nothing aloud.

Jock Taylor proved that he knew his watering places for they arrived at Mason's wells an hour before sundown. Three other herds were there but they had watered and moved off. Mason's round wooden tanks were full and open for the new bunch. It cost Dave a nickel a head from his scrawny wallet for the watering. By dark they had moved off and were in camp.

"Too dark for you to separate your stuff tonight," Dave told Pat Gurnsey. "Throw into my camp. I'm going to the settlement while Shootgun finishes supper."

THE SETTLEMENT consisted of four frame shacks, a store, blacksmith shop and saloon. Dave found the man Mason at his steam engine and pump. He wondered why it was Mason's wells when there was only one well.

"You say there have been several herds through?" Dave referred to an earlier hurried talk.

"Didn't say several. Said four. Two yesterday and two day before that."

"So there's stuff with two days on

me for Monaduke's."

"Fffft!" the grimy-fisted man snorted. "May be a dozen from other sides— Every cow-boss in two hundred miles is hitting for them pens."

"You know a man named Pat Gurnsey?" Dave asked. "Young fellow?"

"Never heard of 'im. Try over yender."

"Over yender" was a bunch of men, a supper fire and two tents. Dave squatted amiably in the loose circle. Curious eyes fastened on his cap; two or three mouths curled with amusement.

"'Bout train time?" asked a grizzled, middle-aged man.

"Toot-toot!" Dave responded, in kind. "Any you men know a young fellow named Pat Gurnsey?"

"Sure," said a young waddy. "I used to ride with Pat on the Jingle-bob. Wish I could again."

"He's a square shooter," said another.

"Fast as a lizard's tongue," added the grizzled man.

"He's takin' a bunch of three-year-old heifers to the railroad."

The talk faded. Dave wondered what these cow people were doing here a mile from the nearest herd.

"You men know any cattle thieves?" he asked abruptly, watching for expressions.

Quick looks took him in, but no words answered. Were these men rustlers? Dave rose to his feet, chuckled good-naturedly, tapped his cap on his elbow and strolled toward what passed for a saloon.

That drinking place was little more than a leafy bower—dried branches on a crude frame. The bar looked like a Fourth of July lemonade stand. Dave wasn't interested in a drink for the first man he saw was Pickenpaugh's alleged foreman, Ed Creasey.

The big man, just turning away from the bar, saw Dave.

All talk stopped as every eye turned on Dave. Creasey swayed nearer two or three steps.

"You cow-thievin' railroad conductor, I'm goin' to throw you out of

this hog shed."

Dave peered whimsically over his spectacles at the man and chuckled a little. It stopped Creasey, somehow. His bellow dropped to a mumble.

"No, won't t'row—throw you out—shoot you and drag you out. Pull your weapon!"

Drunk though he was, he meant business for he began to fumble for his gun.

"Better save it, Creasey," Dave advised. "I'm not armed. Never pack a gun except for herd stampeders."

"Herd stampeders?" Creasey echoed thickly. He tried desperately to focus on Dave. "You shayin' I sham-stampeded your bunch? Blast you, you die for that."

His gun came out. One or two men growled and started forward to prevent a murder. Then a man flitted past Dave, and faced Creasey. "Pat Gurnsey!" a voice murmured from somewhere in the crowd.

Pat spoke over his shoulder to Dave.

"I'll salt this down." And to Creasey: "Stick your gun back, Ed, and sleep it off." Pat didn't have his gun out, but he was obviously ready.

"Pat Gurnsey!" whispered Creasey in awed tones.

"Put it up!"

"Sure, Pat! Just foolin'. Friend of yours?"

CREASEY'S gun went back into the leather as Gurnsey buffaloeed Creasey out of the shelter. Dave, looking after them, dusted his cap and looked at the crowd benignly.

"Quite a vinegaroon, my young friend," he said, admiringly, and went outside.

There, Pat Gurnsey touched Dave's arm.

"I'm ready to hit for camp," he said. "Came to get some smoking."

"You mighty nigh got some from Creasey," said Dave. "Thanks."

They spoke little on the ride back to camp. Dave's mind was seeing the picture that had shown against the curtain of the night for just a minute

or so, outside the saloon bower—Pat Gurnsey talking close to Creasey; Creasey nodding and walking away. So Pat was acquainted with Creasey. Were they partners? Was this keen, steely-eyed youngster in with Creasey and Pickenpau? And were they working some kind of a trick?

Back at the camp Jock Taylor and his two side-kicks had their horses saddled and were waiting.

"Thought we'd go up to the settlement a little while, Mr. Allen," said Taylor. "The Mexican will take the first hitch on night guard. Gurnsey's man will have the second. One of us'll take the third."

Dave shook his head and his voice went flat again.

"Nope. Pat's man was up all night and Aguilar has been on the go since eleven o'clock last night. You three will take the guard tonight."

The three knew definite talk when they heard it, evidently, for they led their horses off sullenly to the rope corral.

Dave, his thoughts barking up every tree they could find, didn't go to sleep at once. Presently, in the darkness, he heard stealthy footsteps moving away. He counted a hundred, then moved barefooted to Taylor's blankets.

They were empty.

Later he awoke from his uneasy sleep. The moon was back, bright as silver. He could see Taylor's bed. Taylor was in it. Dave was certain of that from the regular snoring.

But somebody else was stirring. Dave turned over and, keeping his head down, peered out.

It was Patrick Gurnsey, getting into his own bedroll. Dave distinctly heard him grunt as he took off his boots and tossed them to one side. . . .

Dave Allen was awake briefly half a dozen times through the night—the penalty for a herd owner with a crew of unknown quantity. So that he was the last out of his soogans in the morning. The moon was still there, and stars too. Dave got a tin cup of coffee at the fire and walked off from

the bright light to scan the dark land. Three or four other fires were pinpoints in the morning darkness—other herds ready to take up the march for the distant Monaduke's and the free ride to market.

Dave sighed a little.

A figure squatted down beside him. It was Pat Gurnsey.

"After you felt Taylor's bed last night," Gurnsey said, "I got me up and trailed him to the wells on foot. Took him a half hour to walk the mile, and the same time back. But he only talked five, ten minutes with Ed Creasey and Fran Golden."

"Rich name, Fran Golden," said Dave. "Who is he?"

"Oh, a grizzled old cow-thief, up there at the tents."

"You talk to Creasey again?" Dave asked.

"Again?" said Gurnsey, catching Dave's slight emphasis. "What I said to him there at the hogwash wallow, Mr. Allen, was that if him and Pickenpauh had a hand in stampeding my cattle, I'd probably kill him. And if he messed some more, I sure would kill him."

A pause followed as both men sipped hot coffee.

"Mr. Allen, I want you to know I'm no gunslinger for orneriness. Only for cattle thieves and such like. When it's pushed on me."

"Pat," said Dave, "two heads are better than one, when one is shy of cattle savvy, like mine. And two men financially interested on a drive are better than just one. How about us holding together for the drive to Monaduke's?"

"Hoped you'd say that, Pop. It suits me. I've got a wagon somewhere out there." He lifted his tin cup from the dark earth. "It'll catch up in a day or two, likely. We can throw our supplies in together. And you can be the boss and me the driver."

"Settled," said Dave. "Except for the last."

Not a word about partners.

"We'll make Buffalo Lake for a late watering tomorrow," Pat went

on. "Be a lot of herds there, probably. After that it's might near dry country to Monaduke's. We'll have to chouse 'em along. Lonesome country, empty as a churchhouse on Monday. If thieves are trailing herds, and they are, it'll be in that stretch we'll have troubles."

Dave tossed out the last of his cold coffee, and told of his suspicions of Pickenpauh and Creasey, which were vague enough.

"I'm in the clear, though, Pat," he added. "Everything I've got I paid for. And justice being on our side, we should be able to handle any owl-hoots who pop up around us."

Pat Gurnsey chuckled. "I like your kind of talk, Pop. I savvy it myself."

III

THE DRIVE, that day, was without special event, except that Pat Gurnsey's wandering chuckwagon caught up with the outfit. By night they were settled to routine. The next day, as hours passed, they counted the dust smoke of half a dozen other drives moving steadily toward Buffalo Lake. Dave thought uneasily of his thin wallet and the rising competition for the free haul of the first shipment from Monaduke's.

At noon of the second day Pat rode on for the lake to pick a site with good grass for the camp, so the stock could have ample grazing in case they had to lay over a day or two.

By midafternoon they were in sight of the water rendezvous. A dozen herds were visible. Dave's hopes dropped several notches. The cattle, sniffing water, began to break into a trot. The rainwater pools the night before had been muddy from a previous herd, and short in quantity. Few of the cattle had got their fill. A third of the bunch had gone positively short. The day was hot and the herd grew proddy. It took a lot of riding to hold them down. Jock Taylor got himself desperately busy.

"If they break loose, there'll be the devil to pay!" he flung at Dave

as he hurried past him.

He'd hardly spilled the dire prophecy when a herd a quarter of a mile to their right made the break and came hightailing for the lake under a hurricane of dust. Cowboys could be seen riding wildly but they couldn't stop the stampede for water. Dave saw the thundering bunch drive into another bunch already around the little lake and saw men there in a great scramble of riding and criss-crossing.

The stampede was contagious. Dave's bunch became unruly. Every man was in the forefront trying to stop them. Dave, bouncing and bumping in his saddle and holding his cap on with one hand, raced from the drag to help up front.

A big high-horned steer bellowed suddenly and rushed with lowered head. The riders had to give way. They pounded after the animal to bring him back. Through the opening they left more steers rushed. In fifteen seconds it was a breakthrough, a flood of wild-eyed thirsty brutes which could not be halted. Dave and the other men had to spur to get out of the way.

They raced after the fleeing drive through a wall of dust. They heard rather than saw their cattle hit the hundreds already at the water. Dave all but groaned. Then they were past the dust and up to the wet fringe of the lake. The water was two or three hundred yards across, in a depression with rising ground on two sides. Some of the cattle were mired. Many had been pushed from shore and were swimming. Men were all mixed up, shouting and swearing.

A ragged, dusty old cowman, having drawn back some distance, began to shout and wave his hat, calling for the riders to come to him. Dave and Jock Taylor joined the growing crowd.

"Listen men," the old range hound called in a forceful voice. "Two-three more bunches mix in here we're goin' to have a eggnog that'll take us three, four days to untangle. Let me run this for a while. What you say?"

"Go ahead!" somebody shouted.

"You all agree? Good! They's other bunches comin'. One man head out to each of 'em and stop 'em. Keep 'em back. Rest of us will try to unscramble these busted aigs."

At least thirty riders surrounded the lake and waited with the patience of cattle handlers until the stock had drunk their fill and begun to draw back. Slowly the men drifted the stuff away in little bands. Jock Taylor and his crew managed to edge forty or fifty head of Dave's and Pat's stuff away, moving them back to where the chuckwagon waited.

Then all the cattle at the water were driven away, moved a mile off. Men began to enter the herd and drift out their brands. Dave had seen nothing of Pat Gurnsey. He circled the entire roundup looking for him. But Pat wasn't there. Dave found the dusty old cowman in charge.

As he rode up the old man regarded him and grinned a little at the attire.

"The railroad send you here, Cap?" the old-timer said.

DAVE SHOOK his head. "I'm on my own. I've got two hundred and forty-six head on the grounds here."

"What brand?"

"What brand? "Uh—why—er—?" For the first time Dave was at a loss.

"Good swaney, man!" exclaimed the old boss-man. "Don't you know your own brand?"

"Why, I've got several."

"Well, what air they? Where's your bill of sale? It'll show the brands."

"I reckon that in my ignorance I didn't get a bill of sale," Dave confessed.

"A fine cow conductor you are!" the boss shrilled disgustedly.

Other men had heard the talk. More, seeing the knot of riders and suspecting trouble, came loping up. With tremendous relief Dave caught the sight of Pat Gurnsey among them. But it was Jock Taylor who came to the rescue.

"I'm his foreman," Taylor announced. "I know the brands. We've got seven different brands. There's one of 'em now." He chinned to where Aguilar the Mexican and another man were hustling six or seven steers from the roundup. "The Horseshoe Bar."

"Hey!" shouted a little fellow in a big hat. "That's my brand. I ain't sold no stuff out of it, neither."

Dave saw Jock Taylor go sickly gray under his dust and tan. The boss cow-man instantly was filled with angry suspicion.

"What's your other brands, feller? Name 'em! Quick!"

"The Connected Circles, the T G, the Open Box—" Taylor began haltingly.

"Hi!" came another squawk. "The Open Box, that's me. I ain't sold nothin'. But I had thirty-four head stole a month ago."

In the hot afternoon there were only the small sounds of the restless horses, the larger noise of men working the herd off there. Dave's glance sought Pat Gurnsey. And found his steel-gray eyes slitted and cold and watching.

"Well, Mr. Conductor, what you sayin'?" demanded the boss.

"I'll say to all of you, this." Dave spoke up briskly. "I bought my herd back at Almorland. In good faith. And paid cash."

"Who did you buy 'em from?"

Dave took off his straight-visored cap and tapped it thoughtfully on his elbow. Replaced it.

"I don't like to jump right out with his name," he said. "Might get an honest and innocent man in trouble. But"—he nodded at Taylor—"this man was in the crew. I got him with the herd. Maybe he'll tell you."

Taylor looked freshly startled. "I—I was with the crew," he admitted. "But I hired in just the night before. I don't know who owned the stuff. Don't know nothing about it except I hired to him and come along."

"Cow-thief from the railroadin' camps," muttered a voice.

"Wearin' that cap and making out like he's a conductor."

From out of the rising angry mumbling and muttering the boss man spoke again.

"We want to know who you bought 'em from, if you bought 'em." He was angry and impatient. "If he's honest he won't get in no trouble. If he's a thief, we want to know it. And we want to know if you're the thief."

Dave saw the little Horseshoe Bar man making a loop. He looked at Pat once more. The steely eyes were still slitted and cold and watchful.

"Hanged if you can make me—" Dave began stubbornly, then his glance fell on a rider farther out. "Why, there's the man right now. Let him speak up. Come in, Pickenpaugh."

"It's a cussed lie!" big Pickenpaugh bawled. "I got my own herd out here, back. I never seen this stiff-bill before right now."

"Railroad trash!" the Open Box man howled. "Drag him on a rope!"

Then Horseshoe Bar tossed his loop. Dave instinctively tried to knock it off. But his arm went through. The loop tightened under his arm and over his other shoulder. It tightened, puckering his shirt around his breast. Dave took his hand from the rope. Laid both hands on his saddle-horn with dignity, and peered over his spectacles at the man who held the other end of the rope.

THEN THE silence was made noisy by a horseman crowding up beside Dave. It was sweet music in Dave's ear to hear a new mutter: "Pat Gurnsey." And to hear Pat speak at his side.

"Slack your rope, Pecos John!"

"Sure, if you're sidin' 'im," said the Horseshoe Bar man, and the rope eased.

Pat loosened the loop and tossed it off. He laid his hand on Dave's shoulder.

"I'm working with Mr. Allen," he announced to them all. "One night back a ways I was raided and my

stuff stampeded. The next night his bunch was given a run. Next day our stuff was together. He said he'd bought his hundred and ninety-six head from Pickenpaugh. Ed Creasey was in on it. I thought for a little bit, just now, maybe Mr. Allen was in with them. But when he saw Pick and named him out, I knew it was all to the good. It's up to Pickenpaugh—"

"Where is Pick?" somebody demanded.

"The sun-of-a-gun—he's gone!" came a shout.

The compact knot of riders loosened up. But big Pickenpaugh was nowhere to be seen.

"Must've jumped in the lake."

"Or be hidin' in the dust somewhere."

The horsemen bunched back. The little Horseshoe Bar man was vocal again.

"What about my stuff he says he bought from Pickenpaugh?"

"And mine?" questioned the Open Box owner.

The crowd stilled once more.

"Gents," said Dave, and he was himself again, peering over his spectacles, "if I've been green enough to buy stolen cattle—well, they're yours, not mine. If you can prove ownership."

"Reckon I can help out in that," spoke up a new voice. A brisk man crowded in. "I'm brand inspector for this here district. Reckon I know all the owners."

Pat nodded to Dave. "I'll look after this mess, if it's all right, Pop."

Dave tapped his cap again. "It's better than all right with me, son."

When the mess was straightened out and Conductor David Allen's herd was separately bunched once more he was shy sixty head of proved stolen stuff that he had been forced to give up. Pat's fifty big fat spayed heifers were all present and accounted for.

"Reckon what you've got left is honest stuff," said the brand inspector. "Pickenpaugh and Creasey are only half-breed cattle thieves—mean-

in' they raise some and own some legitimately to hide behind with their stealing. We'll catch 'em dead to rights, one of these times."

Pat had bunched and held the stuff to the northward of the lake. Taylor and the other two men had disappeared along with Pickenpaugh. At the last Pat came riding out with two new men. That made a driving crew of six, counting Dave and Pat, except that one had to look after the remuda. There were still two wagons with cook-drivers.

"We're heading out right now," said Pat, though the sun was so low it cut into their eyes.

"The reason I wasn't here to meet you was that I'd ridden on looking for water," he explained to Dave as they got under way. "Found some pools ten miles ahead. Two big drives have watered there. They are all that's ahead of us so far's I can find out. We've got to keep rammin' if we aim to be the first at Monaduke's. But our stuff is in good condition, if their legs'll only hold out."

At dark they stopped. The weary cattle bedded down at once. Dave hated to see them routed out at midnight, when the silvery Indian moon was high enough not to cast shadows that straying steers could hide in.

"We'll chouse 'em along smart in this nippy cool," said Pat. "Ought to hit the pools about daylight. We'll hold 'em there till they drink again, which will be early, then make a long pull, for there's no more water likely till tomorrow night. I'm rushing the dog this way because we've got a lead start and we want to hold it, on account of water, and camp sites, and fuel."

"Hold it and increase it," said Dave, and added ruefully: "Hope no more cattle thieves get to us. If they do, I'm broke."

"Pickenpaugh and Creasey will have their hopes on us, you can bet!" said Pat. "They picked us out to start with. They're not men to let go once they sink their teeth in. I pulled Creasey's bit loose from a grab once.

He'd rather give me the skids than make some money."

They got away from the pools before nine o'clock. Two dust clouds, marking herds, had become visible behind them. The grass was good. The cattle did not have to stop to graze. They ate as they moved. The dust clouds were left behind before night. But it was a dry camp.

BY NOON the next day the cattle were bawling for water. They had stopped grabbing grass. They moved along at a slow but steady pace. Two more dust clouds rose to the brassy skies far off to the right. The herd was overhauling the two drives known to be ahead.

They reached three separated wells with windmills at dusk. The cattle fought for water and got filled.

For two more days they cut along with no competitors lifting dust. It was dull monotony in an empty land and emptier sky.

Then in a night a norther hit. Snow flew briefly, changed to rain. The cattle got up from the bedgrounds to drift before the cold. All hands were required to hold them. The rain continued through the day. It was hard to keep the herd moving and few miles were accomplished. But other herds were facing the same opposition.

At times the rain was a blinding wall, but the crew knew that it solved the water problem and were not disgruntled. Sheets and holes of water were on every hand.

Twenty-six hours after the rain started it wore itself out. The norther freshened but clouds remained. It was raw weather. Dave found a tent and his bedroll about the greatest comforts in his lifetime.

Then the weather cleared and warmed. In the light soil, quick drying land, dry earth and, soon, dust, took the place of sloppy mud. When that happened, a new dust cloud rode the sky far off to the eastward. They had no idea who it was and would not use up horse-strength to make a ride

to find out. Then one night, squatting at their supper pans and coffee tins, Pat Gurnsey spilled good news. "Four more days to Monaduke's. I figure."

"I've learned a lot about the cow business," said Dave. "But the lessons come high. Those sixty steers I had to give up."

The next forenoon a lone rider caught up with them. Dave puckered his brow trying to remember where he had seen the young fellow. Then it came to him—there at the tents by Mason's wells, the rider had been with the grizzled man Pat had said was Fran Golden, a cow-thief.

The rider told a story that was a thriller. With that drive, off to the east, he said, was Pickenpaugh and Ed Creasey, Jock Taylor and Fran Golden and a few others of the same caliber.

"Pick and Ed have got a hundred and ten head of their own three-year-old steers," he went on. "They're aimin' to lift your stuff and kill all of yuh before you all get to the loadin' pens."

"They didn't send you over to tell us," said Pat.

"Sure didn't. I quit 'em in the dark of the moon last night. I took a job with Golden because I had to eat. Didn't know he was throwin' in with them thieves, Pick and Ed."

"You wantin' a job with us now, likely," Pat jeered gently.

"Nope. It wouldn't be quite right. Anyhow, you'd suspicion me. After the job at the pens is done, I'd like to work with you, Pat—if you're still ridin' then."

"You used to be a speedy liar, George, over on the Jinglebob."

"Sure did. Learned it lyin' to a step-daddy. But I've found out it don't pay off. My ma was a good woman. I've about wore the habit down to where I can throw it. Well, I wanted to tell you not to sleep too durn tight the next few nights. I'll be movin' off out of sight."

"Better take chuck with us."

"I got some stuff—swiped it in

place of my pay."

"Eat anyhow. Save that for—till you see us again."

"Don't care if I do. I'd enjoy some honest company."

IV

WHEN THE boy was gone Dave looked quizzically over his rims at Pat. Pat shook his head.

"He may be lyin'. It may be a fix-up. We can't take chances."

That night Dave and Pat took turns on watch a mile or two east of the bedgrounds. Riding slowly back and forth. Or sitting in the dry grass listening. But no enemy showed up.

The morning's breakfast chant was "Three more days to Monaduke's." That afternoon they saw, a long way off, a single horseman coming toward them, from the north. Suddenly, a half mile away, the rider veered sharply and went at right-angles toward the east. Dave got out his spyglass and handed it to Pat.

"Maybe you might recognize him."

Pat rested the tube across his saddle.

"It's Ed Creasey," he said. "Likely spyin' out the land ahead."

"Looking for a good place to way-lay us," Dave speculated.

"And got himself turned around and thought we were his outfit." Pat began to laugh. "Ed's clumsy that way. They'll hit us tomorrow night, or early the last morning. Pick is nervy enough to try to grab this outfit and ship it as his own."

"I suppose he's had that in mind all the time," said Dave. "We can't attack 'em without cause, kill a lot of men, and get some killed."

"All we can do is stop what they start." Pat agreed.

Two days to Monaduke's and going strong! The riders knew what was in the air. They watched like prairie hawks all that day. It was a long hard drive. Pat went ahead to find a good tactical night site.

"Picked a place on Stingy Creek," he reported back. "Betwixt the water and some low hills. Not so good, but

the best I could find. It gives us a chance to chouse the herd two ways, if we have to run."

"Why not water and drive on for the pens?" Dave asked.

"A forced drive after the last two long days would knock off too much weight," Pat answered. "Anyhow, those thieves will try to take us right up to coming in sight of the pens. After they've tailed us this far, they likely figure us for a no-fighting outfit, three Mexicans without rifles. One of 'em old. And—"

"And me," said Dave.

"And three Americans besides you and me," Pat went on. "Three young rannies who may not have guns at all. But I've got a little surprise for 'em there."

The surprise turned out to be three scarred single-shot army Springfields and three lever guns, with plenty of ammunition for all. They were wrapped in old soogans in the wagon. Pat said he'd got them in a trade and kept them all on the theory you couldn't tell when a bunch of rifles might come in handy.

The herd grazed in the dusk, on luxurious creek-bottom grass before they bedded down. The strip from creek to little hills was no more than a hundred yards wide. The shallow, seepy-creek growth was a wild tangle of pecan trees, red oaks and grapevines. But the cattle had open ways out, either up or down stream.

Two guards were put on the herd. As soon as dusk thickened enough for them not to be visible from the wagons, Pat took his own original man and rode east. Dave with Aguilar, "Shootgun" and Pat's driver, rolled the wagons together. Then, with nothing more to do, they ambled around, watching and listening. They had desire for sleep.

Eleven o'clock was at hand by Dave's open-face railroad watch and he was ready to relieve the herd guards with Aguilar and Pat's driver when they heard a splash in the creek. The cocking mechanism of Shotgun's single-barrel blunderbuss clucked

faintly off in the darkness. The rider must have heard it, for Pat's amused voice came to them.

"Don't shoot! Surrender."

His report was that Pickenpaugh's outfit was about three miles away long the creek. They had nine or ten men. They had sent out one man, Taylor, to find Dave's setup. He had all but ridden into Pat, but had not seen him, which indicated over-confidence.

Evidently they thought Dave and Pat were unaware of their presence. Taylor had made a fairly quick trip of it.

"There'll be no moon," Pat reminded. "They may try to run over us with their herd, and stampede ours. They can bring their bunch down between the creek and the hills and be almost on us before we hear them. Or so they'd think. I left Riley on watch there. He's about a mile out. We might as well hit the soogins and pick us some sleep—with our guns in our fists."

DAVE COULD sleep in a bumping, roaring caboose or bunkcar, but he couldn't sleep this night in his blankets. Too much was on his mind—his shortage of sixty head of cattle, the threat of stampede or attack, what the future held for him. Maybe he should have stayed with railroad-ing; it was good honest work with regular pay.

After an hour of it he gave up, crawled out and got on his shoes and coat, and cap, for the night was close to being frosty. He meandered around, listening. Strolled time and again two or three hundred yards in the direction of the enemy. No sounds at all in the still, clear, but dark night, except little rustlings in the grass, or the sleepy cheep of a dreaming bird in the creek thickets.

One o'clock. Two o'clock. Then a little stir of Pat getting up to go on guard. Dave meant to be the other, but Shotgun was up too. He mounted and rode off to the herd with no more than a grunt. The two other guards

came in presently and got into their rolls. Then quiet descended again.

The glittering cold stars rolled on in the majestic arc of a mighty drive wheel. A saddled horse lay down and was instantly up with a disgusted grunt. He must have lain down on the stirrup, Dave thought. The racket may have disturbed the herd a little, for Dave heard the voices of Shotgun and Pat raised somewhat in their crooning to the animals.

Three o'clock. The twitter of a bird or two getting their night's sleep out. A saddled horse shaking itself violently, weary of the saddle. The rattle of leather and metal was loud enough to be heard around the world, Dave thought irascibly.

Four o'clock. The darkest hour before dawn, if it could be darker than it had been. Dave's eyes were heavy and the lids felt raw and rough. He sat down against a wagonwheel. And must have dozed for a minute, for he started up, and heard the slow, stealthy steps of a horse and the faint creak of leather.

"That you, Riley?" he whispered, thinking the creek guard had come in to warn them.

"It's Pat." His tone was low and guarded. "Now's the hour they'll strike. Or they'll wait till day and try to take us after we're strung out on the other side of these hills. Heard anything at all?"

The words had hardly melted with the darkness when a coyote, off to the south, raised its lonely-mad gabbling cry. In the shocked stillness the men heard a cow-animal get up in the herd, belatedly to stretch and lie on its other side.

Then—breaking on their ears like bedlam—came shouts, and shots, and the terrified heaving of the herd.

It was expected, all right. But from the unexpected side—the west side, away from the other camp.

"A fine cowhand I am!" Dave heard Pat say disgustingly, condemning himself.

They heard, above the hoof-pounding thunder of the coming stampede,

the cry of old Shootgun. A cry of warning, and desperation.

The other four men—Pat's wagon driver, the two American hands, and Aguilar—were out of their beds at the first alarm. Cursing they came leaping to the lee of the wagons, joining Dave and Pat.

Then the hundreds of hoofs were shaking the earth. The beasts had savvy enough, as often happened, to split in the lead when the wagons loomed before them. But the wagons jolted and shook with the scraping of the bodies. They heard the tongue of Pat's wagon crack and splinter and knew that a steer or two had gone down under the other, following hoofs.

So swiftly did the stampede pass, that the six men were left as in a vacuum of silence. Or so it seemed. But only for seconds. The yelping was still going on. With still an occasional shot.

"Let 'em have it!" Pat said thinly, between his set teeth.

The blast that tongued from the wagons into the faces of the coming riders must have been a thunder of surprise. It stopped them. One man whimpered out there, and it sounded like Pickenpaugh. They must have been caught with empty guns, having fired their charges to start the cattle. Only three seemed to be firing.

The men behind the wagons kept up their blasting. Dave was on his knees behind the double-tree of his wagon. Swiftly he had emptied his .28. Now he began with his lever gun.

THE OPPOSITION out there melted away quickly. All except one rider. His horse came plunging on, high and huge as it leaped the wagon-tongue beside Dave.

Then there was light on the scene. Dave had been vaguely aware of its brightening. Grass was on fire, where the stampeding hoofs had scattered the embers of the cook's fire. The one rider stopped, bawling like a madman—Ed Creasey.

"Pat Gurnsey! Gurnsey! Come out, you yellow dog and face me."

Then Pat was standing against the yellow blazing of the grass, spraddle-legged, with a gun in his fist. Creasey saw him, and his gun began to spit down from the rearing horse. He fired three shots. Pat Gurnsey fired two. His lead sledged Creasey from his saddle.

"Any of our men hurt?" Pat asked after a moment. "If not, we'd better flog out this fire before it sets the whole country ablaze."

They learned then, that one of the men whom Pat had hired at Buffalo Lake had a bullet-broken arm. After the fire was extinguished, Pat took the lantern that Dave had ready and went hunting. He found Jock Taylor, bullet riddled. And old Shootgun hoof-riddled. They figured the first volley had knocked the old cook from his saddle. And they found one of their horses dead, and two steers at the wagon-tongue.

Still before daylight, the man George, who had given them their first warning, came riding in. He said he'd been in camp a mile away.

"Fran Golden and his two men are hightailin' for Arizona, looks like," he said. "Fran's got a busted hand. Bullet. They left Pickenpaugh out there, dyin', but I reckon they didn't know it."

Dave, Pat, and George, with their lantern, found Pickenpaugh sprawled in the deep grass, with two bullets through his big body.

"You blasted old railroader," Pickenpaugh said heartily, as he made out Dave in the light. "Reckon I—nicked you—on that buy. Stolen stuff." His voice began to whisper. "Take enough of my stuff to make up your losses and give rest to the boys who bury me."

A man came riding up. It was Pat's man, Riley.

"Don't see how they got past me," he was complaining. "Don't savvy how they done it."

"They went around you, Riley," Pat said. "Don't worry. It's my fault we got caught."

They buried Pickenpaugh with Creasey and Taylor and Shotgun.

They left Pat's wagon and by full daylight they found their herd grazing not far from where two men held Pickenpaugh's stuff. Dave insisted that Pat and George pick out enough of the steers to make up for the sixty head he had given back to the owners. They took forty-five head of the better animals, and told the two astonished herd-holders that the rest was theirs.

It was mid-afternoon when they gained sight of the new yellow-board pens at Monaduke's. Two big herds were already there, being loaded.

"Man can't have honey and butter on all his biscuits," said Dave.

They found a telegraph operator in a box-car office. The man's eyes popped wide and he stuck out a long bony hand to Dave.

"Why, you old cow conductor you! Heard you'd turned to boots and bawls."

They learned that there would be another train along tomorrow, maybe, and they could ship then.

"Well, I've got enough cash left to pay the freight," Dave told Pat when they got back to their horses.

"Don't let that hurt you," said
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Pat. "In twenty-four hours on this good grass our stuff will put on enough meat to pay the freight."

Dave faced him, a little uneasily.

"Pat," he said diffidently, "how'd you like to take on an old railroading fool like me for a partner in the cow business?"

"Been hopin' yuh'd mention it, Dad. How about you takin' my stuff and yours to Fort Worth? I'll stay here and hold our crew together, and bring in my wagon."

"Settled! Dave snapped.

"Except for one condition," said Pat, trying to keep down his grin. "That you buy you some saddle-boots and a hat while you're in Fort Worth."

Dave took off his cap and tapped it on his elbow as he peered at Pat over his spectacles, humorously.

"I hate to part with it," he said. "But tell you, I'll trade it in on a hat up in the city—one of them ten-gallon things like yours, just to please you."

Thereupon they signed their partnership with something more lasting than pen and ink and paper—a smiling handshake.

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Figure 1



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